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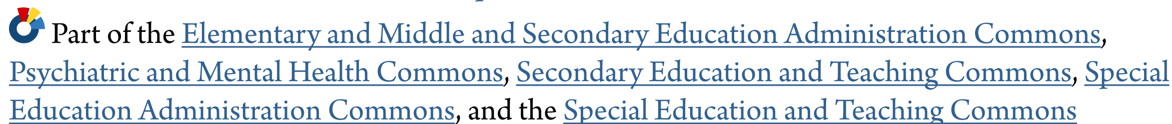
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Walden University

College of Education

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Aerial Anne Liese

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Walden University
2017

Abstract

Special Educators' Perceptions on Effective Preparation and Practice for Student Success

by

Aerial Anne Liese

MA, New Mexico Highlands University, 2005

BA, University of New Mexico, 1997

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Education

Walden University

November 2017

Abstract

Alternative school settings are success prospects for students at risk of school failure. However, research on the daily experiences of the special educators in alternate school settings tasked with educating the at-risk population, is limited. The purpose of this phenomenological study was (a) to recognize the perceptions of special educators concerning their preparation to advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure; (b) to determine how to improve special educator preparation programs in alternative school settings. Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory, focused on student success provided the study's framework. Twelve semistructured interviews were conducted to examine special educators' perceptions on preparation and practice for student success. Data were analyzed through block coding, code comparison and thematic searches. The study's results included accounts of special educators' perceptions and challenges related to preparation and practice for student success in alternate school settings. Emergent themes included applying classroom structure and technology, as well as individualized student instruction. Participants cited a need for rich teacher/student relationships to advance student success. Included are inferences regarding the development of teacher/student relationships. Also included are suggestions for educational leaders to consider while preparing preparatory methods for special educators who teach within the alternative school setting such as administrator knowledge of what special educators require to teach in the alternate classroom. This study may lead to social change by providing information on special educator preparation coursework meant to develop student success for the alternative school student population.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

U.S. education reform efforts, including the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), have placed pressure on education stakeholders and their accountability systems to meet expectations to prepare students for postgraduation (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015; Shin, Lee, & McKenna, 2016; Sledge & Pazey, 2014). Learning institutions across the United States are being challenged to raise student success rates by implementing effective instructional strategies—evidence-based practices (EBPs)—that are grounded in research and proven to yield successful results (Cornelius & Nagro, 2014; Detrich & Lewis, 2013; McLaughlin, Smith, & Wilkinson, 2012). In this research study, student success was defined as the academic achievement by a student that leads to obtaining a traditional high school diploma or general education diploma (GED; Roberson, 2015; Smith & Thomson, 2014; Sullivan & Downey, 2015).

Administrators in U.S. schools expect that special education teachers effectively use EBPs in their classrooms, as directed by the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA; Broughal, 2015; Cook et al., 2015). IDEA requires that every student with special educational needs has an individual education plan (IEP) and dictates that "a statement of the special education and related services… *based on peer-reviewed research to the extent practicable*, to be provided to the child" (Sec. 20). However, the availability of EBPs for the instructional purposes of special education teachers is limited (Cook et al., 2015). To meet U.S. education reform efforts, schools nationwide must engage in new initiatives and methods to increase the availability of EBPs for students

with special needs. Educators can use these academic initiatives and methods in the alternative school setting (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; IDEA, 2004; Kruse, 2012). In this study, an alternative school setting was defined as a public high school that works to address the needs of students that “typically cannot be met in a traditional school, provides a nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special, or vocational education” (Porowski, O'Conner & Luo, 2014, p. 1). An example of these initiatives includes supportive socioemotional EBPs for students who are at risk of school failure and have diagnosed special educational needs (SEN; Edwards, 2013; Kronholz, 2012). SEN refers to students whose classroom learning is challenging, irregular, slow, or otherwise problematic in comparison to their peers (Edwards, 2013; Kruse, 2012). SEN is legally defined under IDEA as when a student is clinically diagnosed with one or more of the disabilities classified in IDEA who requires special education services to learn because of the disability (IDEA, 2004; Lee, 2016).

SEN students, requiring an IEP and authorized under IDEA, present challenges to special education teachers in alternative school settings (Bottom, 2016; Cannon, Gregory, & Waterstone, 2013). A large percentage of the students in alternative schools have behavioral and emotional problems and receive special education services under one or more disability categories (Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014b; Major, 2012; Smith, 2012). The development and implementation of EBPs meant to meet the needs of this population can be a daunting task for special educators if not well-prepared (Shady, Luther, & Richman, 2013). This is due to limited research alternative education program practices,

definitions, and instructional standards that special education teachers are expected to use (Porowski et al., 2014; Sass & Feng, 2012). Furthermore, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2012, 2013); U.S. Department of Education (2012-2013); Greenberg, McKee, and Walsh (2013); and Hoxby (2014) all mentioned that teacher accountability reports and teaching guidelines for alternative education programs lack purpose because the collected data underscore program inputs instead of program outcomes.

Background

Since the 1990s, stakeholders in the field of special education have created a knowledge base concerning the application of effective EBPs for SEN students. However, the profession's progression to exercise them is slow because of inadequate preparation and training (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015; Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014b). Scholars have used the terms preparation and training interchangeably. In this study, I separated the terms. Walsh (2013) explained that teacher education programs are tasked not with training the next generation of teachers but preparing them "for the diverse population with 21st-century challenges" (p. 20). According to the American Educational Research Association (AERA), training an educator is "an oversimplification of teaching and learning, ignoring its dynamic . . . social aspects" (as cited in Walsh, 2013, p. 20). Because of this study's conceptual framework, self-determination theory (SDT), I focused on several aspects including (a) how special educators can motivate SEN students to succeed in the classroom by supporting their basic psychological needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy (Haerens et al., 2013); (b) how a person's

curiosity about his or her surroundings fosters interest in expanding his or her knowledge; and (c) how special educators undermine their students' basic psychological needs, which stifles the natural, purposive striving required for academic success (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Moreover, SDT includes a focus on students and how teacher education programs can best prepare their student candidates to meet their students' needs. Justisfication as to why SDT was chosen for the study's framework instead of a theory of teacher preparation and/or perceptions includes (a) continued inconsistencies in teacher preparation policies and practices, (b) SDT practice in the classroom is considered an effective EBP, and (c) a growing disproportionality in special education programs.

Inconsistencies in teacher preparation policies and practices. Special education services, accommodations, and instructional methods differ from state to state and are frequently contingent on state laws, Common Core practices, and the percentages of SEN students within individual school districts (Samson & Collins, 2012). Because of such variances and irregularities in services, accommodations, and teaching methods, inconsistencies in educator preparation program policies and practices result (Samson & Collins, 2012). Additionally, although educators have confidence in the practice of teaching students that being self-determined is central to student success, contradicting curricular and teaching models exist (Samson & Collins, 2012).

SDT practice in the classroom is considered an EBP. SDT is considered an effective EBP in special education, and it has been linked to student success and psychological well-being (Haerens et al., 2013; Wehmeyer, Palmer, Shogren, Williams-

Diehm, & Soukup, 2013). SDT can also be used in classroom teaching practices and the reform of educational policies (Reeve, 2012). Additionally, scholars have recognized a necessity for interventions to promote self-determination, verifying that SEN students are not as self-determined as nondisabled students (Reeves, 2012). Moreover, because SDT is concentrated on an individual's motivation, emotions, development, and growth-oriented methods, it is deemed of significance in the educational realm. A student's innate tendency to seek out learning and knowledge is considered an educator's greatest resource to tap into for student success (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

Disproportionality in special education programs. The U.S. demographic profile of SEN students is diverse and undergoing transformation economically, culturally, and linguistically (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015). For example, male African American students remain overrepresented in special education programs and are placed in alternative school settings over other populations (Ford & Russo, 2016; Wieringo, 2015). The NCES (2012) demonstrated that 43.6% of Latinos with special needs are labeled as learning disabled and are not receiving appropriate support for their cultural or linguistic differences. Pae, Whitaker, and Gentry (2012) stressed that by the time a teaching certificate and license are issued, special education teacher programs should have prepared their candidates for the 21st-century classroom and the demographic profile of students within them. Porowski et al. (2014) and Sass and Feng (2012) illustrated that the opposite is occurring.

Additional Background Information

Johnson and Semmelroth (2014b) and Shin et al. (2016) disclosed how special educators in the alternative school setting face additional difficulties concerning adequate preparation to implement EBPs in their classrooms. The NCES explained that more than three in five newly graduated special education teachers reported that their educational school experience left them feeling without quality preparation for "classroom realities," because of unsatisfactory coursework (as cited in Feng & Sass, 2013, p. 122). The quality and rigor of certification standards, job confidence, and readiness to implement EBPs to produce student success is linked to preparation. In this study, I looked at special education teachers' perceived preparation, as guided by the mentioned aspects of SDT that are focused on student success, for helping SEN students succeed in the alternative school setting by applying EBPs. In addition, I used teacher certification standards/coursework and their rigor, teacher proficient knowledge of effective EBPs, and readiness to implement EBPs to measure special education teachers' perceived preparation. Efficacy was also a factor included in the measurement.

Additional challenges in the profession stem from the overlooking of special educators' perceptions concerning their preparation and instructional practices once in the classroom. According to Sledge and Pazey (2013), many special education teachers expressed that their continued guidance to achieve student success after hire is given limited attention. Johnson and Semmelroth, (2014a) and Marek (2016) mentioned that special educators as frustrated that their principals were not prepared to recognize special educators' diverse responsibilities and need for specialized preparation.

For this study, the definition of perception, as guided by SDT, was defined as the way in which a special education teacher instructing in the alternative school setting interprets and understands his or her daily teaching experiences based on his or her values, beliefs, educational training, and previous classroom experiences. Further framed definitions measuring perceptions and perceived preparation (also guided by SDT and focused on student success) are illustrated in Figure 1 and 2 for clarity throughout the study.

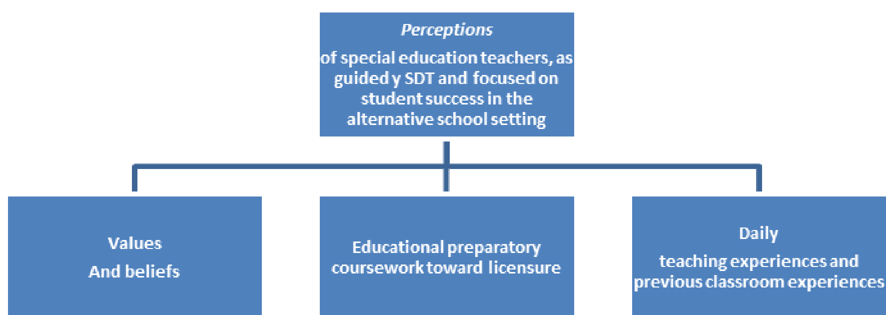

Figure 1. Framed definition of the term perceptions.

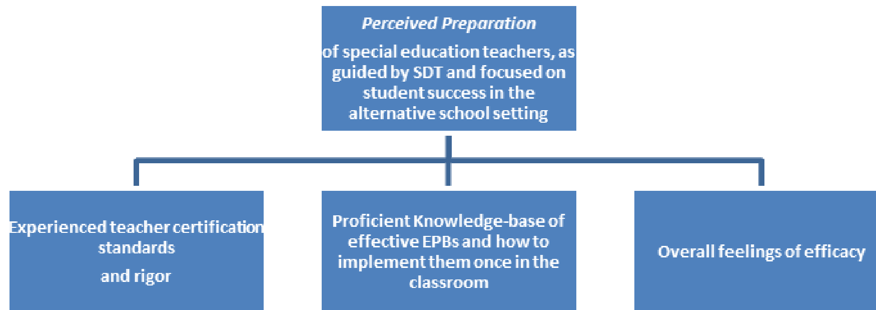

Figure 2. Framed definition of the term perceived preparation.

A Call for Social Change

The intention of professionals in the field of special education is to offer a personalized education to students identified as having special needs (IDEA, 1997, 2004). The skills and expertise of a special education teacher, especially when instructing in the alternative school setting, differs from that of a general education teacher (Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014b). Sledge and Pazey (2013) established (a) the wide variety of roles that special educators assume, (b) the complexity of their schedules, (c) their varied daily roles, (d) the responsibilities they share in providing individualized instruction, and (e) the coordinating services with other professionals they must do.

Many special education teachers in the alternative school setting are also expected to take on a significant number of responsibilities outside their teaching duties (Shin et al., 2016). These responsibilities are time-consuming, involve high levels of collaboration with parents and auxiliary staff, and require the teacher to possess a distinctive skillset and expertise (Boe, 2014; CEC, 2012a; Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014b; Major, 2012).

Ensuring those attending university special education teaching programs are prepared to take on their roles and responsibilities is an aspect of their educational preparation toward licensure (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015; Cochran-Smith et al., 2015; Shin et al., 2016).

However, according to the U.S. Education Commission (2016) and Vernon-Dotson, Floyd, Dukes, and Darling, (2014), there is a call for change within preparatory special education teaching programs. Preparatory special education teaching programs should be more demanding when it comes to certification standards to prepare candidates for the demands of the profession and the diverse needs of the student population within the field (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015; Cochran-Smith et al., 2015; Shin et al., 2016). The Council of the Great City Schools, the American Federation of Teachers, and the Council of Chief State School Officers stress that strengthening special educator preparation programs and raising their teacher effectiveness, especially for first-year teachers, is of importance. Improvement of teacher preparation program can impact student success.

The National Council for Teaching Quality (NCTQ) provided an in-depth assessment of the nation's special education teacher preparatory programs (as cited in Greenberg et al., 2013) and concluded that, although U.S. states have altered their teacher policies, preparative teacher training practices remain unaffected. Additionally, U.S. special education teacher training programs are not producing the well-prepared special education teachers pledged by IDEA (Greenberg et al., 2014). Moreover, some school administrators across the nation are dissatisfied with U.S. special educator preparatory

programs. Administrators expressed frustration that their school districts are having to use monies to prepare teachers in skillsets they believe educators should have received in their educational coursework towards licensure (Greenberg et al., 2014; NCTQ, 2013).

The skills and specialized expertise required of special educators and the credentials needed to achieve full certification are outlined in the Advanced Preparation Standards (CEC, 2012a). However, according to the NCES (2012), certification requirements for U.S. special education teachers are failing to prepare many teachers to enter the profession well-equipped to do their jobs. Poor teacher preparation due to declining certification standards is unfavorable to students because they lose educational time and skills (Aragon, 2016; Gable, Tonelson, Sheth, Wilson, & Park, 2012; Major, 2012). Furthermore, the gap in the research on special educator preparation and proficient practice is evident due to the following reasons: (a) noticeable decreases in the rigor within certification requirements (Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014a) and (b) an absence of data within the knowledge base of special educator insights into their classroom needs to properly perform their jobs (Aelterman et al., 2013). This gap has led to the unsuccessful application of effective EBPs for SEN students classified as at risk (Gable et al., 2012; Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014a).

DeMonte (2015) and Cochran-Smith and Villegas (2015) asserted that effective teacher preparation leads to student success. Teachers who feel prepared to teach typically remain in the profession longer. Coursework that focuses on methods of teaching contributes to educators' sense of preparedness and retention in the field (Sindelar, McCray, Brownell, & Lignugaris-Kraft, 2014). Special education teachers in

alternative school settings can develop feelings of low self-efficacy if they do not feel confident and prepared in their teaching practices (Pancsofar & Petroff, 2013; Zee & Koomen, 2016). Moreover, special education teachers who experience extended periods of emotional strain, fatigue, and job dissatisfaction experience burnout (Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014b; Thurston, 2013). Instructor attrition and a decline in student success ensue (Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014; Major, 2012; Simon & Johnson, 2013). Farrell (2012) and DeAgelis, Wall, and Chee (2013) presented reasons as to why special education teacher attrition remains high in U.S. schools. According to Farrell and DeAgelis et al., when many special education teachers enter the actual public school classroom, they are cut off from professional guidance and are left alone to handle difficult classroom learning and behavioral challenges. Failed accountability efforts to provide quality teacher preparation for special educators in the alternative setting has resulted in growing concerns within university education preparation programs at the federal, state, and district levels (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; IDEA, 2004; Jackson, 2016). Such a concern warranted this study.

Deficits in alternative education teacher preparation. According to Ladd and Sorensen (2017), every year one out of every five U.S. students drops out of school. Finding preventative measures to decrease this mass exodus, coupled with a need to reduce its associated social and economic costs, continues to be a challenge to special education leaders nationwide (Jackson, 2016). Hoffman (2015) argued that a link exists between poor special education teacher preparation and the dropout rate. Smith and Thomson (2014) discovered that if a better educational experience had been provided that

met students' educational needs and circumstances, school success might have been probable for many of the nation's dropouts. However, research on the topic is scarce (Sledge & Pazey, 2013). Nevertheless, the Education Law Center (2017) stressed that effective alternative school programs that have well-prepared teachers can deter students from dropping out. Additionally, Toumbourou, Olsson, Williams, and Hallam (2013) acknowledged that if special education teachers in the alternative school setting are prepared, SEN students at risk of school failure have a greater chance of experiencing school success. With deficits such as special educator shortages, attrition, and poor preparation facing U.S. school districts, a basic reorganization of how special education preparatory teacher programs prepare their candidates may be necessary to ensure that all alternative schools provide an effective and supportive education that meets the needs of its diverse students (Allday, Neilsen-Gatti, & Hudson, 2013). These issues are further discussed in the next chapter.

Aragon (2016) and Herrenkohl and Favia (2016) inferred that several of the difficulties existing within alternative school programs include (a) a lack of offering EBP options that meet struggling SEN students' academic needs, (b) not properly addressing SEN students' many socioemotional needs that impede learning, and (c) a lack of finding and retaining prepared special educators to teach SEN students. Additionally, Armstrong (2014) explained that if SEN students at risk of school failure have socioemotional needs that hinder their learning, alternative school programs should provide interventions for these issues. Teagarden, Kaff, and Zabel (2013) stressed, "This is not education's responsibility alone. Collaborative psychological services and mental health services are

necessary” (p. 12). This requires alternative education program stakeholders to hire prepared special education teachers who can provide services and strategies to teach and support their students. According to the NCES (2016), over half of all U.S. school districts have trouble recruiting highly qualified special education teachers with such needed skills. Moreover, the NCES (2016), Greenberg et al. (2013), and the NCTQ (2013) stated that preparation within university coursework for special educators remains unsatisfactory. With such deficits existing (Guskey, 2014), the intention of this study was to identify the perceptions of special educators’, as guided by Deci and Ryan’s (1985) SDT, preparation to educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure. This may increase knowledge on how educators may better serve the student population. Ultimately, the aim is to better prepare special educators to help SEN students at risk of school failure in the alternative school setting achieve student success.

SEN students who repeatedly experience school failure are more likely to be successful if offered an education that is individualized and highly structured (Leone & Weinberg, 2012). Gable et al. (2012) and Greenberg et al. (2013) detailed the importance of providing special educators with the preparation necessary to offer their students effective and necessary EBPs to experience school success. Little was discussed in the literature regarding special education teachers’ perceptions of their preparedness (Faez & Valeo, 2012; Farrell, 2012). However, Faez and Valeo (2012) examined the perceptions of 115 novice special education teachers concerning their preparation and self-efficacy and found that many of the teachers felt inadequately prepared to teach their student populations. A step in improving such concerns, as pointed out by Faez and Valeo, is

becoming aware of special educators' perceptions about their preparation and practices to produce student success, as was the intent of this study.

Audience

The audience targeted for this study was composed of principals, special education teachers in the alternative school setting, parents, social workers, community members, counselors, mental health practitioners, social service workers, and workers in the juvenile justice system. SEN students at risk of school failure have a higher chance of positively altering their lives when the right tools and opportunities to succeed are placed in front of them via well-prepared professionals (Wieringo, 2015). Alternative school programs grounded in this belief give school administrations a starting point to establish quality school settings where trained special educators can effectively teach and SEN students can successfully learn. A quality school setting was described as (a) a setting with high expectations and (b) a setting that builds paths to outside resources, such as mental health clinics, that help students overcome obstacles and conflicts impeding their success. Obstacles and conflicts may include substance abuse, transportation dilemmas to and from classes, legal issues, and credit recovery difficulties (Wieringo, 2015). Gathering data regarding special educators' perceptions of working within the alternative school setting is imperative in working towards this goal (Wieringo, 2015).

Problem Statement

Most special education teachers entering the profession are not prepared by teacher education programs to handle the academic and social-emotional related problems of their student population (Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014b; Korenis & Billick,

2014; Jackson, 2016) due to decreasing certification standards and insufficient knowledge and skills, such as applying self-determination to educational practice (Aragon, 2016; Greenberg et al., 2013). Because of teacher unpreparedness, the needs of many students requiring special education services are not being addressed. Such circumstances make a special educators' job to increase SEN student success rates an area of concern and worthy of study (Gagnon, Houchins, & Murphy, 2012; State of Connecticut, 2014; Wood, 2015). The special educators' perceptions, as guided by aspects of SDT and focused on student success, of teaching in alternative high school settings and their preparation to educate SEN students who are at risk of school failure are unknown. The insufficient knowledge and skills in U.S. teacher education programs are problematic to the success of SEN students.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological research study was to identify the perceptions of special educators, as guided by SDT and focused on student success, concerning their preparation to educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure. The intent of this study was to determine how to improve special education teacher preparation programs based on how special educators perceive their preparation experiences to teach in alternative school settings. Through the examination and analysis of interview responses, I determined special educators' perceptions regarding their educational preparation and practice of EBPs to educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure. The data collected supported the improvement of special educator preparation methods needed to educate this diverse

population. The findings were used for special education teacher preparation to help preparatory programs to better serve the needs of special education students, thereby increasing student success.

Research Questions

The following research questions, as guided by SDT and focused on student success, were addressed in the qualitative study.

RQ1: What are the perceptions of special educators teaching in alternative high school settings concerning their classroom instructional preparation to effectively educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure?

RQ2: How do special educators teaching in alternative high school settings perceive their preparation to proficiently practice EBPs in the classroom to educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure?

Conceptual Framework

Most SEN students at risk of school failure enter alternative school programs or drop out due to disengagement from school (Balfanz et al., 2014; DePaoli et al., 2015; Wieringo, 2015). There are links between student school disengagement and unfavorable psychological and educational outcomes for SEN students (Harper & Davis 2012; Wang & Peck, 2013). Educators should measure students' school disengagement to help them adjust their teaching practices and policies to avoid school failure (Pappa, 2014). SEN students who are disengaged with school exhibit characteristics of apathy towards their education. To better understand the alternative education of SEN students at risk of school failure and the academic processes that special education teachers perceive to be

most needed to successfully work with them, Deci and Ryan's (1985, 2000) SDT was used as the framework for this study. The SDT offered a framework for understanding features of youth school disengagement that typically influences school failure. According to the SDT, people possess three instinctive emotional needs including (a) autonomy—feeling ownership for a person's actions; (b) competence—a desire to feel successful, and (c) relatedness—feeling an attachment to others. Deci and Ryan (2000) described these needs as "nutrients that are essential for ongoing psychological growth, integrity, and well-being" (p. 229). Classroom settings that satisfy these needs include participation and skill proficiency, which inspires students' engagement, motivation, and self-determination to succeed in school (Pappa, 2014; Reeve, 2012). Scholars have coupled student autonomy, competence, and relatedness to positive classroom behavior, intrinsic motivation, perseverance, and school success regardless of the student's gender, age, and ethnicity (Pappa, 2014; Reeve, 2012). Additionally, SDT provided a framework for addressing research-based special education teacher preparation methods for the population of students in question. In the literature review, a more detailed explanation of SDT and how it frames the study is provided.

Nature of the Study

I used a qualitative, phenomenological approach to understand perceptions (i.e., thoughts and lived experiences) of special education teachers instructing in the alternative school setting. In the interview questions, I focused on the participants' perceptions regarding their educational preparation and EBP proficiency to increase student success rates. This phenomenological approach was appropriate for this study because the

interview questions involved the personal perceptions, beliefs, and viewpoints of how and why these special educators determine their perceptions (Lyons, Urick, Kuron, & Schweitzer, 2015). A quantitative or mixed methods approach would not have been appropriate to implement for this type of study, due to the open-ended interview questions that were asked of the participants (Perry, Golom, & McCarthy, 2015). It would also have been a challenge to narrow the results of this sort of study to a quantifiable or empirical conclusion. The open-ended responses from these interviews were qualitative in nature and led to inductive inferences, which differ from the empirical results sought in quantitative approaches (Hauff & Kirchner, 2014). I used face-to-face interviews that lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. By using open-ended questions, I hoped to understand special education teachers' lived experiences regarding their preparation to educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure.

Operational Definitions

For this study, the following terms were used and are defined as follows:

Alternative school setting: A public high school that works to address the needs of students that "typically cannot be met in a traditional school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special, or vocational education" (Porowski et al., 2014, p. 1).

Effective alternative education: An unconventional school program planned and implemented to meet the needs and improve the academic success of youth demonstrating at-risk behavior (Porowski et al., 2014; Wilson, Stemp, & McGinty, 2011).

Effective teacher preparation: The degree to which a teacher positively affects a student's school success (Goe, 2007).

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): This bill superseded the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESA, 2015) (20 U.S.C. 6301 § *et seq.*). ESSA reaffirms former President Barack Obama's belief that "fundamentally every child, regardless of race, income, background, the zip code where they live, deserves the chance to make of their lives what they will" (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 1).

Evidence-based practices (EBPs): EBPs are educational methods that have been documented to be effective through empirical research (Detrich & Lewis, 2013; Gable et al., 2012).

Flexibility: Providing for a student's needs by catering to the student's agenda, as opposed to a traditional school's predetermined schedule (Jackson, 2016).

Individual educational plan (IEP): A legal document that defines the education of a student placed in a special education program and discusses the disability classification and services the student will receive. Also, written into the document are annual goals, objectives, and accommodations to assist the student's learning (Zepeda, 2012).

Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA): Federal law that entitles all students, regardless of disabilities, race, and gender, the right to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.

Perceptions: The way in which a special education teacher instructing in the alternative school setting interprets and understands his or her daily teaching experiences

based on his or her values, beliefs, and previous educational coursework and classroom experiences.

Preparation: Teacher certification standards and rigor, teacher knowledge of effective EBPs and readiness to implement them, as well as efficacy, were used as the measure for special education teacher perceived preparedness.

Professional development: Scheduled, focused, current, inclusive, and job embedded preparation intended to improve and develop an educator's practices with the objective of increasing student success (Zepeda, 2012).

Self-determination theory (SDT): A theory of motivation that applies traditional empirical methods to form its concepts and to advise the methods used in classrooms (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Janssen, 2015; Shores, 2014).

Students at risk of school failure: Youth with high probabilities of not finishing high school or who are likely to leave school due to the following behaviors: poor grades, continual truancy, significant and reoccurring behavioral and/ learning challenges, substance abuse, domestic matters, or incarceration (Bowers, Sprott, & Taff, 2012; Roberson, 2015).

Student engagement: Student engagement or disengagement pertained to having a significant impact on motivation and learning. It has four dominant research perspectives: behavioral, psychological, sociocultural, and holistic. Student engagement was viewed through the psychological lens (that explains engagement as individualist psycho-social processes) and the sociocultural lens (that emphasizes the criticalness of the social aspect of the framework; Kahu, 2013; Sinatra, Heddy, & Lombardi, 2015).

Students with special educational needs (SEN): Youth who qualify under IDEA (2004) for an IEP that addresses distinctive educational needs and offers personally designed services to meet those needs (Jackson, 2016). Additionally, the legal definition of a student with special educational needs is used for this study: “Individuals who have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities” (Sinatra, Heddy, & Lombardi, 2015).

Student success: The academic achievement by a student that leads to obtaining a traditional high school diploma or GED (Roberson, 2015; Smith & Thomson, 2014; Sullivan & Downey, 2015).

Traditional education: An all-inclusive education designed for the public in an established school environment. The student population in a traditional education school setting was typically based on the student’s area of residence instead of on his or her educational needs (Jackson, 2016).

Assumptions

In this study, it was assumed that the special education teachers interviewed reflected on their experiences thus far in the school year. There were several other assumptions within the study. The first was that all persons interviewed answered the interview questions with honesty. The next assumption was that the principal of the school in question was well-informed of the special educators involved in the interviews and their successful licensure to teach in the setting. Finally, I assumed that I did not influence how the participants choose to answer the interview questions.

Scope

This qualitative study encompassed only special education teachers in one state, from one school that is an alternative feeder high school for five traditional high schools. The study was restricted to the staff of one alternative high school where professional development took place because of the application of a school improvement plan recognized as a means of improving student success.

Delimitations

One delimitation in the study was the breadth of the terms preparation, perceptions, and student success. It was possible that the comprehensive nature of the terms could end in differences amid specified aspects that lead to students leaving school or entering the alternative school setting. Ultimately, this range of meanings had the potential to restrict the generalizability of the study's results. Additionally, the category of students recognized was imperative to the study, as it impacted further conclusions. For illustration, students with special educational needs who have endured adverse

childhood experiences (ACEs) are more inclined to enter the alternative school setting compared to their peers who have not experienced ACEs (Wieringo, 2015). Additionally, in this study, the legal definition of an individual with special educational needs was used: “individuals who have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities” (IDEA, 2004). This study was limited to special education teachers within one school district in New Mexico. The sample size included 12 participants who all worked within the school district and who lived in the state.

Limitations

Qualitative research is restricted to specific samplings (Merriam, 2014). Therefore, the research results were not generalizable to every alternative school setting. Additionally, the study was restricted to a single alternative school in the Southwestern area of the United States. The alternative school was considered unique in nature. Emphasis was placed on its uniqueness because of its collected characteristics including (a) diversity in student culture; (b) low socioeconomic status (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017); (c) high dropout and incarceration rate; (d) large percentage of minority students, and overall education limitations (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017). All these factors influenced the study’s results. This statement regarding uniqueness aided in establishing a need for lived experience data rather than a practical dataset that may be acquired through another methodology. Holistically exploring the single school site and its uniqueness added to answering the research questions, given the stated inconsistencies in teacher policies and practices and changing demographic student profile in U.S. schoolrooms. The small sample size of 12 special education teachers also

limited findings of the study. Teachers' perceptions and practices with ninth grade students may differ from those of students in the 12th grade. In addition, because I focused on one large alternative high school setting that is a feeder school for five smaller surrounding school districts, generalizability is limited. However, bigger school districts often have special education teacher shortages, which generates a need for alternative school programs for SEN students who are at risk of school failure. The framework of the study also involved a voluntary response rate, which was low. Nevertheless, the use of face-to-face interviews was an effective method because it gave the opportunity to clarify responses. Rich description and context were maintained through detailed journaling and field notes. A final limitation was the role of the researcher as a primary instrument of qualitative studies (Mertens, 2014). It was possible that I brought potential biases to the process. However, several steps were taken to mitigate bias including (a) all potential respondents were given an even chance to participate in the study; (b) a data analysis plan was created before the interview questions were written to ensure alignment; (c) participant requirements were defined to achieve interview objectives prior to the research, guaranteeing appropriate scope; and (d) to eliminate misinterpretation, reports and findings were specific when referring to the population (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012).

Significance of the Study

The NCES (2015) and Leone and Weinberg (2012) projected that schools nationwide would continue to receive an increased number of SEN students who are at risk of school failure. Consequently, demand for well-prepared special educators would

more than likely increase. Educational stakeholders were encouraged to evaluate the classroom preparation skills and EBP proficiency of the special education teachers in their school districts (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015; Cochran-Smith et al., 2015; Shin et al., 2016). In this study, I provided stakeholders with an understanding of the influence that increased teacher preparation and EBP expertise could have on the success of SEN students who are at risk of dropping out of school. Furthermore, data regarding special education teacher perceptions concerning job readiness and EBP proficiency could help stakeholders increase knowledge related to SEN student success (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015; Cochran-Smith et al., 2015; Shin et al., 2016).

The conceptual framework of the study also emphasized socioemotional health as a key component of student success, which is discussed in Chapter 2. The study could also help to ensure that school districts and their stakeholders are held accountable for student success and teacher preparation. Additionally, the exploration of relationships between quality teacher preparation and effective teaching practices supported the fostering of special education teacher growth and improvement of special educators' self-confidence in the classroom. When teachers feel confident in their capabilities and knowledge to teach, students reap the benefits of higher levels of success as they develop confidence in their learning (Chetty, Friedman & Rockoff, 2014; DeMonte, 2015).

SEN students should receive an education that develops their potential to be successful members of society (Sindelar et al., 2014). The ESSA (2015) and IDEA (2004) challenged schools to raise academic rigor and implement EBPs to make certain all students achieve academically. Exploring relationships between effective EBPs and

quality special education teacher preparation has the potential to meet and exceed the standards of federal law to teach SEN students in the alternative setting. Also, I supported the assistance of at-risk SEN students to receive instruction from prepared special education teachers who embrace active participation in learning about and using effective EBPs to improve instruction and student success.

Chapter Summary

Scholars have illustrated the importance of prepared teachers for student success. Educators, especially special educators, require adequate preparation to ensure such success (Chetty et al., 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2014). Within the alternative school classroom, special educators must question their teaching philosophies, practices, and experiences and broaden their views (Florian, 2014). The purpose of this study was to discover the perceptions of special educators regarding their preparation, practice, and professional needs to effectively teach students who are at risk of dropping out of school. Chapter 1 of this study included an introduction, the background of the problem, the problem statement, purpose, research questions, a conceptual framework, and the nature of the study. Chapter 1 also included definitions of terms used in the study, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and the study's significance. Chapter 2 includes a literature review that consists of (a) research regarding alternative schooling for students who are at risk of school failure, (b) a review of research-based best preparation methods for special education teachers teaching within the alternative school setting, (c) and a discussion of SDT. In Chapter 3, I discuss the methodology of the study, which is comprised of the research design, research questions, population, instrumentations, data

collection procedures, and data analysis methods. In Chapter 4, I outline the study's findings including relevant tables and figures of results from the study. In Chapter 5, I discuss the problem statement with dialogue concerning the inferences drawn from the findings, implications for practice, and further research concerns and recommendations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

According to the NCES (2016), approximately 13% of SEN students are serviced within the public U.S. special education system. The academic success of these students depends on effective instruction delivered by well-prepared special education teachers (Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014b; Sindelar et al., 2014; Sledge & Pazey, 2013). However, recruiting and retaining prepared special education teachers is a challenge within U.S. schools (Billingsley, Crockett, & Kamman, 2014; Boe, 2014; Cullen, Levitt, Robertson, & Sadoff, 2013; Mason-Williams, 2015). There is an inconsistent field of research on special educator preparedness (Hiebert & Morris, 2012). Prepared special educators top school district shortage lists in almost every U.S. state (Daniel, 2015). Shortage problems are directly related to poor teacher preparation (Boe, 2014; Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014a; Major, 2012). Shortage problems are particularly burdensome within inner city schools serving disadvantaged students (Scott, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2015; Zhang, Wang, Losinski, & Katsiyannis, 2014).

A high percentage of individuals working as special educators in U.S. schools are not prepared to teach SEN students in the alternative school setting and do not meet the required certification standards (Boe, 2014). Many are working in schools with "emergency teaching waivers," lacking the needed skills to teach students who have special educational needs (Billingsley et al., 2014; Boe, 2014; Florian, 2013; Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014b; Shinn, 2015; Sledge & Pazey, 2013). Such poor teacher preparation and conditions create poor outcomes regarding student success within the U.S. special

education system (Ford, 2012; Shady et al., 2013; Shinn, 2015) and are alarming within alternative school programs for students who are in danger of dropping out of school (Caldart-Olson & Thronson, 2013; Cullen et al., 2013). In the literature review, I focus on this vulnerable population. I explain how quality special education teacher preparation influences student success. I also present a history of alternative schools and the population of students the setting largely serves. Topics crucial to effective special education teacher preparation in the alternative school setting follow. To close the literature review, there is a discussion of research-based methods deemed effective in preparatory programs to produce effective well-prepared special education teachers.

Literature Search Strategy

I searched for peer-reviewed journals through search engines and databases including EBSCO, Sage, ProQuest, Google Scholar, and Digital Commons through Walden University Library I also searched websites of other learning institutions. Key search terms included *alternative education, students at-risk of school failure, special educator preparation, and educators' perceptions of the alternative setting, student success in the alternate school setting, alternative school reform,* and *SDT*. The scope of this literature review entailed research studies and dissertations dated 2012 through 2017 from the Walden University Library.

Conceptual Framework

SEN students at risk of school failure who enter alternative schools are typically detached from academia and are described as apathetic and unmotivated to learn (Scott, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Understanding what is driving such

behaviors and altering them is key to the analysis and planning of SEN students' future school success (Lam, Wong, Yang, & Liu, 2012). I applied the SDT, established by Deci and Ryan (1985), because of its consideration as an effective EBP. It was also chosen because it is considered useful for examining detailed methods concerning how to effectively prepare special education teachers to implement EBPs and associated variables (i.e., active engagement, intrinsic motivation) into the alternative school setting to increase student success (Aelterman et al., 2013; McMullen & Warnick, 2015; Shores, 2014).

According to SDT, individuals possess three fundamental, instinctive psychological needs: (a) autonomy—a desire to be self-sufficient and independent; (b) competence—a desire to excel in school and feel purposeful in life; and (c) relatedness—a longing to feel a part of a group or family unit (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000, 2008). School settings that nurture these human psychological needs embolden classroom learning, engagement, and skill proficiency (Abels, 2015; Aelterman et al., 2013). Lam et al. (2012) claimed that students became engaged in school when their teachers used motivating instructional practices. Lam et al. demonstrated that overall student school engagement improved, as well as self-efficacy, which increased student effort towards schoolwork. When the students became engaged in school, they experienced positive emotions and increasing student success (Lam et al., 2012). SDT can be used to investigate how the fulfillment of persons' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness relates to psychological well-being, drive, and healthy functional relationships (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000, 2008; McMullen & Warnick, 2015). Scholars

have linked these needs not only to student success, but also to self-satisfaction, positive classroom behavior, critical thinking, and future life determination (Abels, 2015).

The development of these three basic needs link to various motivation that is intrinsic, which encourages student success and school engagement (Aelterman et al., 2013; Farrelly, 2013). The word, engagement, as referred to within the context of SDT, is defined as the degree to which a student allows himself or herself to become actively involved in a learning activity (Wellborn, 1991). An underlying objective of SDT is to actively engage and motivate a student, psychologically and intrinsically, to want to be successful in school (Reeve, 2012). SDT theorists stress how a person's surroundings and teacher are factors in this goal towards individual need-fulfillment progression (Reeve, 2012). However, if a person lacks support from his or her social surroundings and teacher, his or her overall need-fulfillment progression declines (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). Student learning disabilities and emotional disturbances are disproportionate in alternative schools.

Student Learning Disabilities and Emotional Disturbances Are Disproportionate

McCallum (2013) stated that minority students with learning disabilities comprise approximately half of the population of students receiving U.S. special education services. Many of these students are taught in alternative school settings. Because of such continual disproportionality outcomes, U.S. policymakers positioned requirements in both the 1997 and 2004 reauthorizations of IDEA intended to reduce overrepresentation problems with the rising population of marginalized students (IDEA, 2004 Vanderhaar, Munoz, & Petrosko, 2015). Decreases or changes in disproportionality have not occurred,

mainly for students with learning disabilities and emotional disturbances (Raines, 2012; Rueda & Stllman, 2013). Academics are seeking answers as to why students who have learning disabilities and emotional disturbances are overrepresented in alternative school settings, especially alternative settings within the juvenile justice system (Aron & Loprest, 2012; Florian, 2013). According to NCES, exact numbers are unknown due to limited research, and the available data have contrasting explanations and descriptions, creating confusion and inconsistencies (as cited in Aud et al., 2012). However, nearly 45% of SEN students in the alternative school setting have identified learning disabilities, excluding language barriers that commonly fuel frustration, poor motivation, and low self-confidence (Gagnon et al., 2012; Mallet, 2013). Griner and Stewart (2013) stressed that having a common set of alternative education teaching standards, policies, and definitions has the potential to address concerns with disproportionality in school settings. Additionally, teacher preparatory programs should focus on the changing demographic profile of SEN students (Cartledge, Kea, Watson, & Oif, 2016; Doran, 2014). There is inadequate research on how teacher education programs prepare special educators for the growing academic and socioemotional diversity within U.S. schoolrooms (Rueda, 2013; Rueda & Stillman, 2012).

Special Educator as Teacher and Motivator

Professionals in the field of special education consider the promotion of self-determination an evidence-based best practice. Researchers have linked a student's level of self-determination to his or her academic success, mental health status, and postgraduation employment (Wehmeyer et al., 2012). The SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000) is a

conceptualization framework used to examine student motivation in classroom settings. SDT includes theoretic grounds for how a teacher can situate the classroom to provide and promote ideal forms of motivation, engagement, and sustained perseverance towards learning (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Hamre et al., 2013). Vital to this mission is an educators' ability to support students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (McMullen & Warnick, 2015). In this section, I outline techniques concerning how a special educator teaching in an alternative school setting can apply principles of SDT in the classroom.

Autonomy. The need for autonomy refers to an individual's desire for life options and the freedom to choose from them (Deci & Ryan, 2000). An educators' support for autonomy refers to relational concerns and classroom behaviors offered to identify, nurture, and develop a student's triggers for intrinsic motivation (cited in Aelterman et al., 2013). SDT theorizes that educators who support a student's need for autonomy (a) fashion structured environments; (b) are involved and caring; (c) promote enthusiasm about learning; (d) enforce student independence and self-regulation of behavior (as cited in Aelterman et al., 2013). Conversely, teachers who dictate orders amid a chaotic classroom setting, and are not genuinely involved in students' quest for success, characteristically inhibit students' psychological needs and hamper autonomous motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Educators supportive of a student's autonomy (a) honor learning preferences; (b) focus on student strengths, interests and curiosities; (c) acknowledge students' viewpoints, difficulties and frame of mind concerning their limitations; (d) make learning relevant; (e) present applicable activities for enrichment

and to make learning inspiring (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Jang, Kim & Reeve, 2012). Conversely, educators who seek only to control students by using commands, punitive intimidations, and threatening language are predominantly ineffective (cited in Aelterman et al., 2013).

Competence. Competence signifies feeling successful when attempting mastery over something (White, 1959). A structured classroom setting nurtures a student's need for competence. Structure refers to the amount and quality of information provided by the educator about classroom expectations and how the student can experience success by following them (Reeve, 2012; Wehmeyer et al., 2012). Educators can offer students a structured setting by (a) clearly communicating guidelines and expectations; (b) offering guidance during instruction; (c) providing step-by-step directions for students; (d) giving positive and meaningful feedback intended to build on a student's sense of competence (cited in Aelterman et al., 2013; Jang, Kim, & Reeve, 2012). Ineffective educators, however, promote misunderstanding in their classrooms by (a) dictating vague directions; (b) exercising confusing procedures within classwork; (c) voicing unclear feedback or harsh criticism (Jang, Kim & Reeve, 2012).

Relatedness. Relatedness involves the desire to feel a sense of intimacy, trustworthiness, and hopefulness in relationships (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Teachers are supporting a student's need for relatedness when they (a) demonstrate concern and respect for their students' learning processes; (b) provide emotional support and resources for students displaying mental difficulties (as cited in Aelterman et al., 2013). Teachers who are not supportive of a student's need for relatedness act with indifference

and apathy in interacting with their students. A teacher's relational connection nourishes students needed psychological requirement for relatedness, which is an essential motivator for students to achieve success in the classroom (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Hamre et al., 2013). Hamre et al. (2013) noted the significance of relatedness after surveying 4,341 classrooms. The study indicated the importance of preparing teachers to connect to their students through the lens of SDT. Teacher support of competence and autonomy were also discovered to be pertinent aspects of sound teaching. Although the study considered over 4000 classrooms and found that instructors who are supportive of their students' socioemotional needs, via healthy relationships, the classrooms were largely elementary settings. However, Hamre et al. (2013) reinforced that students are predominantly driven towards learning when educators make significant efforts to fulfill their students' needs to connect to people and establish self-worth and self-governance. How such efforts are explicitly accomplished was not identified in the study.

Psychological Needs within the SDT Framework

Evidence proves that psychological forces influence student success, classroom behavior and school engagement (Long, Fecser, Morse, Newman, & Long, 2014; Teagarden et al., 2013). Psychological issues arise from various bases including a student's needs, thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Baglivio et al., 2014). However, the terms motivation and engagement in this study pertain to a basic psychological perspective within the SDT framework. Therefore, motivation and engagement are parallel with a students' inner satisfaction of his or her psychological (mental, emotional) needs (Deci & Ryan, 2012). This translates as follows: a student who perceives himself

or herself to be working with autonomy, competence, and relatedness throughout classwork and activities will experience high levels of motivation. In contrast, a student who has these three needs ignored during instruction will experience low levels of motivation.

Students who have experienced extreme trauma, also known as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), can be at a substantial disadvantage regarding student success (Blodgett, 2013; Shankar, 2016). Early emotional trauma during brain development can significantly influence and deter learning, motivation and school engagement. Essentially, engrained psychological complications caused by ACEs steal a student's motivation, self-worth, and self-satisfaction (Olinger, 2015). These complications, otherwise known as at-risk student behavior, often manifest themselves in detrimental ways in and out of the classroom (Blodgett, 2013; Shankar, 2016). At-risk student behavior includes but is not limited to (a) violent conduct; (b) alcohol and/or substance abuse; (c) sexual behavior contributing to unplanned pregnancy and/or sexually transmitted diseases (STDs); (d) poor eating habits and (e) dropping out of school (CDC, 2013b; Eaton et al., 2012). Deterring at-risk student behaviors is an imperative aspect of the study and a component of SDT because most SEN students who are at risk of school failure have endured many ACEs (CDC, 2013b). These ACEs drive at-risk behavior. I believe this statement necessitated the following section, which provides a glimpse into how ACEs negatively influence student learning, motivation, and school engagement.

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) defined. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are characterized as mistreatment expressed through traumatic

events of abuse (physical, sexual or emotional), an absence of parental nurturance, neglect, parent death or incarceration, witnessing domestic violence (especially maternal abuse), household drug use, and/or mental conditions in the home (Foltz, Dang, Daniels, Doyle, McFee, & Quisenberry, 2013; CDC, 2013b). Research from a joint 2016 study from the University of New Mexico (UNM) School of Law and the UNM School of Medicine, and New Mexico's Children, Youth and Families Department (CYFD) yielded concerning data. The studies mentioned that youth who have experienced numerous ACEs often suffer from neuropsychological deficits which “have immediate negative consequences, such as functional changes to the developing brain, which makes [them] more likely to act out in [destructive] ways” (Olmstead, 2016, p. A1, A2; Walkley & Cox, 2013, p. 5).

ACE Impact on Student Learning, Motivation, and School Engagement

The theory of self-determination is a macrotheory of motivation and human development that has been applied to education by scholars for many years to try to understand how specific features of youth development either support or delay student success (Deci & Ryan, 2012). One feature that evidence is increasingly making clear includes that ACEs influence students’ socioemotional and cognitive development and their ability to learn (Florian, 2013). Numerous studies have shown that ACEs are psychologically detrimental and are frequently an antecedent to SEN students entering the alternative high school setting (Dupéré et al., 2015). For instance, a study published in 2016 for the New Mexico Sentencing Commission expressed that trauma from ACEs changes the brain, leaving youth with poor emotional control, little motivation, and

lessened ability to be successful in school. The study also showed that trauma from ACEs causes youth to have difficulty socially connecting with peers and developing close relationships (Foltz et al., 2016; Walkley & Cox, 2013). Further study of ACEs illustrated that knowledge of a student who has experienced trauma could drastically improve how special educators educate, engage and motivate SEN students at risk of school failure (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2016). These factors also support the selection of SDT to frame the study. Additional justification includes the facts that special educators teaching in the alternative school setting commonly have little professional preparation in ACEs and its impact on student success (Gagnon et al., 2012); and there are few EBPs that specifically cater to students who have endured ACEs (Gable et al., 2012).

Farrelly (2013) and Cannon et al. (2013) expressed that special educators in alternative settings, predominantly the juvenile justice alternative school setting, commonly lack a basic understanding of how trauma impacts the brain and how it affects a student's school behavior and performance. Such inadequate preparation commonly leads to student disengagement (Ryan & Deci, 2002). As discussed, SDT suggests that people possess three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Satisfaction of these innate needs is an imperative aspect of an individual's overall mental health, irrespective of time of life, sexual orientation, or nationality. SDT also proposes that people (a) make efforts to gratify these needs; (b) lean towards environments that make fulfillment of these needs easier); (c) endeavor towards personal growth; (d) seek out challenges and different ways of looking at issues and (e) adapt to their surroundings (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Farrelly, 2013). Cannon et al. (2013)

explained that special educators should be prepared to look for and boost these distinctive predispositions theorized by SDT; thereby creating vigorous learners out of students who are disengaged from school. Unfortunately, research illustrates the opposite in many U.S. alternative schools due to poor teacher preparation (Greenberg et al., 2013; Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014b). This study supports filling in this blank.

Connecting ACEs to SDT. SDT stresses that opportunities to satisfy individuals' needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness enable their self-motivation and overall psychological state. Generous research supports this statement, demonstrating the significance of the fulfillment of these basic needs. For example, a study by Park, Holloway, Arendtsz, Bempechat, and Li (2012) established that the emotional engagement of youth played a vital part in impacting their school success as well as their overall psychological welfare. SDT can be considered a redirecting tool in the education of SEN students who have experienced ACEs. SDT posits that regardless of a student's age, sexual orientation, socioeconomic position, ethnic group, or upbringing (traumatized or not), he or she holds innate development predispositions such as intrinsic motivation, inquisitiveness, and emotional cravings to experience school success (Zelechoski, 2013). In contrast to this hypothesizing, Gable et al. (2012) emphasized that students with extreme academic and social emotional needs are "among the least successful of all and rarely evidence significant educational progress" (p. 499). Although discrepancies within the literature were discovered, this study looked at effective teacher preparation to fulfill this gap when considering SEN student success.

SDT differs from other motivational theories in that it expresses how a student's opportunities, views, and ambitions add significantly to the level to which he or she engages in school experiences. Additionally, SDT hypothesizes that unearthing these predispositions is simply a matter of appropriate guidance (Reeve, 2012). SDT was chosen to frame this study because of its distinct emphasis on such guidance using specific and strategic instructional methods (as previously presented) to vitalize the student's inner psychological (mental/emotional) motivation. According to SDT, the integration of effective EBPs and helpful resources is crucial to support student engagement in learning that satisfies a student's psychological needs (Reeve, 2012; State of Connecticut, 2014; Wood, 2015). Heller, Pollack, Ander, and Ludwig (2013) found that motivating students to be persistent and successful in their schoolwork reduced aggression, disruptive behavior, and poor conduct, thereby impacting student success and deterring school failure. Their study showed that increases in student motivation and engagement saw a significant turnaround in determination, ultimately influencing the postgraduation employment prospects and mental health of students (Heller et al., 2013). While this study demonstrated such positive findings, its quantitative strategy failed to provide a thorough consideration of particulars regarding the preparation process from the perspective of teachers and how they effectively improved student motivation and engagement. However, the perceptions which this study intends to discover, in addition to teacher suggestions to improve the existing conditions will offer ideas about the preparation process.

Furthermore, SDT recognizes students' innate motivation and provides suggestions to educators regarding how to effectively engage, nurture and embolden it to encourage student success. SDT distinguishes that students, at times, are unmotivated, dissatisfied, and lack a desire for accountability. In dealing with the inconsistency of inward motivation on one side of the coin, while exhibiting dissatisfaction on the other, SDT research classifies how an alternative school setting can support and vitalize students' inner motivation under specific classroom conditions, (i.e., structure). Student support and vitalization are particularly relevant for students who have experienced ACEs. Ultimately, classroom conditions that nurture competence, autonomy and relatedness have the possibility to create the engagement and motivation necessary for student success (Haydon et al., 2012). Research from Shah, Alam and Baig (2012) illustrated that if special education teachers use classroom techniques grounded in SDT, including those previously mentioned, in addition to relevant classwork, developmental tracking, strength emphasis and self-fulfillment activities, student success is possible. Moreover, in using such strategies a student's internal motivational needs will begin to cooperate with his or her classroom surroundings and psychological needs to produce different degrees of active student engagement leading to student success.

Literature Review

Feng and Sass (2012), The National Council on Disability (2015), and Farrelly (2013) expressed that all facets of alternative education and its challenges need significant study. However, at the forefront of alternative education woes is inadequate teacher preparation to instruct within the setting. Many special educators teaching in the

alternative school setting lack the needed skills and experience, including fewer hours of hands-on time in the classroom, fewer credentials, and less fieldwork experience (DeMonte, 2015; Major, 2012). Additional challenges stem from (a) inconsistencies in explanations and definitions of what student success within the alternative school setting resembles; (b) how special education teachers are prepared to meet student needs (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015). Research illustrates such inconsistencies influence what is regarded as the “achievement gap”—a gap representative of not merely lapses in national student scholastic scorings but the sum of students who make it all the way to graduation (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015, p. 20). Moreover, both national scores and high school graduation rates directly influence what is commonly called the “opportunity gap”—a concept that focuses on the causes of disparities existent between and among students in schools (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015, p. 109). Nonetheless, in comparing the achievement and opportunity gap among students with special needs (in the alternative school setting) and those without special needs (outside of the alternative school setting), a large cavity continues to persist (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014; Gable et al., 2012; McLaughlin et al., 2012). According to The Education Leadership Review of Doctoral Research (ELRDR, 2014), any efforts to close this gap require capturing the voice of special educators in alternative school settings concerning what they find most effective for generating student success (cited in Jenlink, 2014; Zagar, Grove & Busch, 2013).

Moreover, in the alternative classroom setting, one area of student need (social emotional competency) directly influences the other (instructional learning) (Cortiella &

Horowitz, 2014; Houchins, Shippen, & Murphy, 2012; Hoshide, 2012). The conceptual framework of this study, self-determination theory, supports this statement. Furthermore, the presented inadequacies and inconsistencies in special education teacher preparation and the lack of classroom EBP proficiency have left many unanswered questions about the current state of special education preparation programs. These questions regard suggestions for reform (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015; Cullen et al., 2013). Ultimately, the way special educators in the alternative school setting are prepared to successfully meet the diverse instructional and socioemotional needs of their students are not only an understudied area demanding reform but a desired area of study (Boe, 2014; Cochran-Smith et al., 2015; Major, 2012).

Vocalizing the Need for Effective Special Education Teacher Preparation

The field of special education with 21st-century challenges requires transformation if its professionals intend to deliver an appropriate education for SEN students, regardless of the setting in which they receive services (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015; Florian, 2013). To reach this goal, researchers have suggested that special educators and educational stakeholders are cognizant that individual teaching beliefs, motivations and skills are profoundly intertwined in pedagogical thinking and practices—and should be shared with other teachers, principals and researchers (Faez & Valeo, 2012). The voices of special education teachers are critical in helping decision makers understand the context within which students with special needs are served (Sledge & Pazey, 2013; Vernon-Dotson et al., 2014). Answers to the dilemmas U.S. alternative schools face are most likely to be provided by researchers who seek to obtain

understanding in the involvements and opinions of those who currently occupy the special education profession and alternative schools (Brownell et al., 2012). Moreover, if the tools and proper processes do not capture the distinctions of the special education setting, school districts may not be suited to support the growth of special educators. Continual professional growth is a critical need for teachers in all stages of their career. However, ongoing professional development is especially important given the number of novice teachers who enter the profession unprepared to meet the needs of SEN students (Aragon, 2016; Major, 2012; Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014b; Sledge & Pazey, 2013). This is especially discouraging as Flynn (2015) referred to a teacher's beginning years in the classroom as an imperative and pivotal period. Teacher attrition rates are highest amid novice educators (Flynn, 2015). Statistics illustrate that over half of beginning educators exit the profession in five years or less. The exodus is predominantly due to teachers' feelings of inadequacy and unpreparedness to work in the profession (Flynn, 2015). Gaining insight from the voices of novice special education teachers is considered an important step toward reform (Cook, Smith & Tankersley, 2012).

Additionally, pursuing a solid knowledge base about how special educators are taught to instruct within the alternative setting is also considered an effective strategy to answer stakeholders' questions about alternative education reform (Ashmann & Franzen, 2015; Sledge & Pazey, 2013). Faez and Valeo (2012) focused on the voices of novice special education teachers and how they perceived their preparation to effectively achieve student success. The study pinpointed and reiterated that many new educators leave the profession due to unpreparedness. However, the study explicitly looked at students with

language barriers impeding student success and how new educators felt inadequate to address such language barriers (Faez & Valeo, 2012).

Defining Alternative Education

The number of U.S. alternative schools and students attending them is escalating (Cullen et al., 2013). Research explains such growth is due to increased zero tolerance behavioral and truancy policies in traditional public school settings (Nance, 2015). Additionally, the NCES (Aud et al., 2012) and Hollis and Goings (2017) shows that many U.S. high schools struggle to meet the diverse learning and socioemotional needs of their students, primarily, students who are eventually expelled, suspended, incarcerated or end up in the alternative school setting. Regarding what constitutes an alternative school setting, currently, there is not a universal definition of the term; it varies from state to state in the United States. However, federally, an alternative school is specified "a public elementary or secondary school that addresses the needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special, or vocational education" (Porowski, O'Conner & Luo, 2014, p. 2). While this explanation exists, several recent studies defined alternative schools as schools for youth demonstrating at-risk behaviors that could cause them to drop out of a traditional school because of absenteeism, early parenthood, learning difficulties, and/or discipline problems (Slaten et al., 2015; Zolkoski, Bullock & Gable, 2015). As can be noticed, the word, elementary does not appear in these definitions. For clarity, as stated in Chapter 1, in this study an alternative school setting is defined as a public high school meant to address the needs of

youth that "typically cannot be met in a traditional school, [and which] provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special, or vocational education" (Porowski et al., 2014, p. 1).

Types of alternative education programs. Regardless of the school setting, Florian (2014) stressed a need to recognize any school setting, including alternative school settings, as schools that concentrate on building an educational institution based on excellence and the creation of sound pedagogy knowledge. The types of alternative education programs listed below describe the various options available to SEN students at risk of school failure. Alternative schools are required by law to employ prepared and fully certified special educations teachers. I believe knowledge of the different types of alternative schools, in relation to the study, is necessary because of the existing gap in the literature concerning inconsistent practices, policies, and definitions surrounding the setting. As previously mentioned, very little has been presented in the literature about the necessary components and teaching requirements for the various types of alternative school settings. This is true for juvenile correctional facilities (Simonsen & Sugai, 2013). Contrary to what many preparatory teacher education programs teach, juvenile correctional facilities are, in fact, a type of alternative school setting serving over 700, 000 U.S. students on an annual basis. These students are detained for reasons including but not limited to violent behavior and illegal substance trafficking (Vanderhaar, Munoz & Petrosko, 2014). Yet the literature illustrates that most preparatory teacher education programs fail to prepare special education teachers for this "rude reality of [alternative] school classrooms" (Farrell, 2012, p. 437).

Alternative school options have grown (Roberson, 2015). Nationwide statistics refer to the growth as "skyrocketing . . . not steady" (Vanderhaar, Munoz & Petrosko, 2014, p. 2). The growth in alternative school settings is linked to an escalating population of marginalized students particularly (a) minority students; (b) students identified as having a mental illness, and (c) students who are poverty-stricken. Another reason for the growth of alternative school settings includes that stakeholders are identifying how alternative school settings improve SEN students' odds of experiencing school success, leading to graduation, and deterring future criminal behavior (Losen & Martinez, 2013; Hollis & Goings, 2017). Vanderhaar, Munoz, and Petrosko (2014) estimated that the use of alternative school program options would continue to increase, and special educators should be prepared for the challenging school settings.

Due to a lack of a common set of teaching standards and definitions for alternative schools across the nation, student populations and school settings commonly differ within districts (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015; NCTQ, 2013; Ruettgers, 2013). To describe the different types of alternative education programs, Porowski et al. (2014) reviewed data from state and national websites and found the following information: Alternative education schools serve mostly students with behavioral/emotional problems (35 states). Of the reporting states, 18 states reported having alternative education settings in separate locations; 12 states reported having alternative schools within their regular school buildings. Overall, the most common services offered in alternative schools include standardized instruction (21 states), therapy (14 states), social skill-building (13 states), work related skills (12 states), and developmental assistance (11 states) (Caroleo,

2014). Moreover, according to Freeman & Simonsen (2015), there are many forms of alternative schools specifically designed for SEN students who are at risk of dropping out of school. Each school has distinctive characteristics dependent on the student population, the curriculum, delivery method of curriculum, and structural makeup. Some of these alternative school types include the following:

Juvenile justice settings (JJS). The Individuals with Disability Act (IDEA) emphasizes special education as “specially designed instruction, at no cost to parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability...” (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004; NCJRS, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). IDEA states that specially designed instruction is “instruction conducted in the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and institutions, and in alternate settings ” (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004; NCJRS, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). With that being presented, IDEA provisions blanket all state and local detention centers for youth. Therefore, upon the arrest of a youth who is receiving special education services through an IEP, records concerning his or her disability should support and explain disability related conduct. This is a vital piece in assisting and ensuring, that when students who are at risk of school failure are incarcerated, they still receive an appropriate education while serving out their sentences (NCJRS, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Furthermore, alternative schooling within the juvenile justice setting takes many forms including day treatment and educational facilities, detention centers, and residential and correctional housing. Currently, JJS facilities serve over half a million American

youth (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, OJJDP-Alternative Schools, 2016), and federal mandates specified in IDEA require JJS schools, considered an alternative school setting, to provide any student with an education while incarcerated (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, OJJDP-Alternative Schools, 2016).

School-within-a-school. These schools are located within a larger school, typically in its own distinct sector, and created for students with academic and/or behavior problems. A school-within-a-school model typically injects vocational options into schools that emphasize more traditional academic goals (Burright, 2015; Cullen et al., 2013; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015).

School without walls. These schools house students at various sites within the community and are designed with flexible schedules to accommodate students needing special educational and/or training programs (Burright, 2015; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015).

Separate alternative learning centers. These schools are established for students needing specific courses such as parenting classes. They are often located outside the traditional school setting or situated within community business buildings (Burright, 2015; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015).

College-based alternative schools. These schools, intended to assist students who need additional high school credits, are usually located on college or university campuses. The staff of these institutions consists of public school teachers, but provide

students with services that boost self-esteem and personal growth (Burright, 2015; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015).

Second chance schools. These schools give students who have been placed by the home school or legal court system one last chance to get on track before school expulsion or incarceration (Burright, 2015; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015).

Residential schools. Residential schools are for students with extenuating psychological circumstances who are frequently placed by the courts in a school that offers intense counseling (Burright, 2015; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015).

Summer schools. Summer schools are typically remedial due to lost school credits or meant to improve a student's skills or interests (Burright, 2015; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015).

Magnet schools. Magnet schools emphasize specified study programs such as an accounting curriculum. Students are largely present by their free will (Burright, 2015; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015).

Credit recovery programs. Credit recovery programs provide students with a way to regain course credits lost or not earned (Burright, 2015; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015).

Attendance recovery programs. Attendance recovery programs provide students the opportunity to recover mandated days in schools. Attending the courses in a separate setting other than the traditional setting is an option, depending on the state. Saturday school is also a possibility to earn credit for days in school (Burright, 2015; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015).

Community-based alternative education/nontraditional schools. Community-based alternative schools offer student opportunities for involvement in learning experiences relevant to their work interests. The curriculum is merged with learning in the workforce and apprenticeship through partnerships with businesses, the government, the community, and schools (Kronholz, 2012).

Demographics of the Alternative School Setting

Studies regarding the changing demographics of U.S. schools are numerous (Ford, 2012; Pae et al., 2012; Slaten et al., 2015; Zolkoski, Bullock & Gable, 2015). The demographic profile of students being taught in alternative school settings is diverse and undergoing transformation economically, culturally and linguistically (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015). In 2016, the U.S. Department of Education released a fact sheet regarding equity within IDEA, targeting students who are at risk of school failure. According to the USDOE fact sheet, as well as Ford and Russo (2016) and Wieringo (2015), male African American students remain overrepresented in special education programs and are consistently placed in alternative school settings over other populations. Historical data, presented by these authors, indicates that "decades of indisputable reports reveal such imbalances" (p. 51). Additionally, Barrio (2015) found similar overrepresentation when reviewing Hispanic and Latino populations. Barrio shared data from the NCES (2012) showing that 43.6% of Latinos with special needs are labeled as learning disabled and are not receiving appropriate support for cultural or linguistic differences while in alternative school settings. Cartledge et al. (2016) suggested that under-identification, an aspect of disproportionality in special education, is

also a concern. Under-identification denotes the presence (or lack of presence) of a group of students in the overall student population (Gamm, in press; U.S. Department of Education, (n.d.). Cartledge et al. (2016) continued how federal legislation and policymaking designed to minimize under-identification may be limiting minorities' availability to special education services in the alternative school setting.

Additionally, research shows that disproportionality has been an issue in special education for years and there is also a struggle with over-identification (Barrio, 2015; Cartledge et al., 2016; Ford & Russo, 2016; Losen, Hodson, Ee, & Martinez, 2014). Regardless of over or under-identification, a knowledge base about disproportionality and its influence on student success is recommended course content for special education teacher preparatory programs (Szymanski & Shaff, 2013). Ultimately, by the time a teaching certificate and license are issued, special education teacher programs should have prepared their candidates for the 21st-century classroom and the demographic profile of students within them (Pae et al., 2012).

Moreover, the literature revealed characteristics associated with students in the alternative school setting including (a) poor performing; (b) unmotivated; (c) pregnant or are already a mother or father; (d) poor self-esteem; (e) low self-efficacy (Boylan & Renzulli, 2017). Szymanski and Shaff (2013) explained that at-risk SEN students in the alternative school setting typically display characteristics such as impetuous behavior, come from low socio-economic backgrounds and have extensive discipline and legal records. Furthermore, most SEN students at risk of school failure in the alternative school setting experience repeated dysfunctional dilemmas in relationships, are drug dependent

and experience family predicaments that influence school disciplinary and truancy problems (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Khalkhali, Sharifi, & Nikyar, 2013; Petrick, 2014). Moreover, characteristics (i.e., substance abuse) of students in the alternative school setting are frequently intensified if the student has an unmet learning disability, emotional disturbance or unresolved trauma stemming from ACEs (Boylan & Renzulli, 2017).

The Current State of Special Education Teacher Preparation Programs

In an investigation including over 1,000 state and district special education administrators, Johnson and Semmelroth (2014a) reported that 84% of those surveyed agreed that the needed knowledge, skills, and expertise of special education teachers differ remarkedly from educators in the mainstream classroom. These differences are exacerbated by the vast variability in the roles and responsibilities assumed by special education teachers, the heterogeneous population of students they serve, and the expectation that each student's instructional plan is to be highly individualized (Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014a; Sindelar et al., 2014). Sledge and Pazey (2013) emphasized that a key difference between special educators and general educators includes their type and degree of specialization required to educate students. Special education teachers are expected, for instance, to possess expertise in teaching students with various learning, behavioral and emotional challenges; challenges that often manifest themselves differently in students. Additional expectations of special education teachers consist of teaching social skills, handling problematic behaviors, and demonstrating sensitivity to the challenges of students with special needs.

Furthermore, the EBPs special educators employ are vastly different from those for general educators and must cater to each student individually as written in his or her IEP (Cook & Smith, 2012; Lam et al., 2012; Panagopulos, 2015). Survey responses from several state and district special education administrators affirmed this sentiment (Sledge & Pazey, 2013). In fact, nearly all respondents (92%) to the survey presented by Sledge and Pazey (2013) advocated for the use of EBPs. However, researchers have found that the current state of special education teacher preparatory programs is not good. Many are failing to satisfactorily prepare educators for the responsibilities the job of special education teacher encompasses. A majority of special educators enter the profession without the necessary skills to deal with the demands of the job. Most special educators in their first year of teaching lack a strong knowledge base of quality EBPs for the diverse and challenging population of students they are expected to teach (Boe, 2014; Lam et al., 2012; Shinn, 2015). Moreover, Vanderhaar, Munoz, Petrosko, and Joseph (2014) pointed out that although the rapid growth of alternative schooling is apparent, research fails to parallel the growth of teacher preparation processes or the use of EBPs that are essential to teachers who work within that setting.

A Need for 21st-Century Classroom Policies and Practices

Over the last decade, most U.S. states have significantly altered their education policies (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015). However, teacher preparation and certification standards remain nearly untouched (NCTQ, 2013). The NCTQ Teacher Prep Review (2013) exposed the reason: learning institutions are currently not placing emphasis on rigorous teacher preparation. Studies from Lam et al. (2012) and Scott,

Gentry and Phillips (2014) and Thapa et al. (2013) stated that special education teachers exit teacher programs and enter schools without the adequate skills needed for 21st-century classrooms full of ethnically, socially and economically diverse students. Educational stakeholders blame such conditions on inconsistencies in program practices, policies and licensure tracks (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015; NCTQ, 2013; Ruettgers, 2013). Furthermore, according to Walsh (2013), teacher preparation programs fail to guarantee that their student teachers participate in demanding field experiences to deal with the student diversity and challenges many bring to the special education classroom. "By almost any standard, many if not most of the nation's 1,450 schools, colleges, and departments of education are doing a mediocre job of preparing teachers for the realities of the 21st-century classroom" (Greenberg, Walsh, & McKee, 2014, p. 19).

Additional problems stem from principles of academic freedom allowed within teacher education preparation programs. Academic freedom permits instructors to teach as they choose (Aragon, 2015; Greenberg et al., 2014). Although Johnson and Semmelroth, (2014b) considered it apparent that several teacher preparation programs lack effectiveness, there are some programs that are graduating prepared teachers (Ruettgers, 2013). The program graduates are prepared to use EBPs reflective of the practical and real 21st-century needs of their students, including socioemotional challenges that frequently stem from ACEs (NCTQ, 2013). Examples of the mentioned U.S. programs, which are producing knowledgeable, effective graduates are also grounded in research, expert opinion and suggestions from the Common Core State Standards. A resolve that student educators be taught only by effective teachers is also

enforced within the programs. Figure 3 lists the quality standards these programs are enforcing that pertain to special education and stress effective teacher education preparation as a priority—according to NCTQ (2013).

Selection Criteria*:* The program screens for academic integrity among its students.
Early Reading: The program prepares educators to teach literacy as scripted by Common Core State Standards.
English Language Learners: The program prepares teachers to instruct literacy to students who are not using English as their dominant language.
Poor Literacy Skills: The program prepares candidates to instruct literacy skills to struggling readers.
Common Core Content for Special Education: The program certifies that its candidates' content and preparation parallels with the Common Core State Standards.
Equity: The program assures candidates are prepared to work in various school settings, such as schools considered socially and economically challenged and disadvantaged.
Student Teaching: The program guarantees applicants engage in intense field training.
Outcomes: Data on graduates is recorded.
Instructional Design for Special Education: Candidates are prepared to create lessons for students with special needs.

Figure 3. Standards for the NCTQ (2013) teacher prep review as pertaining to special education.

Darling-Hamond (2014) mentioned seven educator preparatory programs that also graduated prepared teachers—as critiqued by "observations of their practice, administrators who hire them, and their own sense of preparedness and self-efficacy as teachers" (p. 548). The institutions examined in the study were Alverno College in Milwaukee, WI; Bank Street College in New York City; Trinity College in San Antonio, TX; University of California at Berkeley; University of Virginia; University of Southern Maine; and Wheelock College (Darling-Hamond, 2014). Although indications existed that the student teachers learned various concepts from diverse programs and felt differentially equipped for certain areas of teaching, there were program features that

made a difference in applicants' preparation. Furthermore, Darling-Hamond (2014) discovered that, regardless of external factors, the programs shared related characteristics, as illustrated in Figure 4 below:

Clear Vision: A shared idea of what quality instruction resembles and this vision saturates the program and its curriculum.
Distinct Standards: Professional practices and policies with distinct standards used to direct and assess courses and field experiences.
Fundamental Courses: Coursework is grounded in solid research on youth development and learning, as understood socially and culturally across contexts, curricula, evaluation, and subject matter.
Extensive Field Experiences: Seven months or more of overseen program seminars and student teaching experiences that align with classwork.
Case Study Instruction: Extended use of educational studies, evaluations and selected cases that directly relate to practical student challenges within the classroom.
Reflection: Distinct approaches that help students challenge their personal views concerning education and how people learn in comparison to individual learning style.
Strong Relationships: Active engagement in coteaching, school and teacher education connections amid school and university faculty.

Figure 4. Effective program features according to Darling-Hamond (2014).

Traditional Versus Alternative Routes to Special Education Teacher Licensure

The U.S. Department of Education mentioned in 2013 that nearly 90% of candidates in public education preparatory programs are registered within traditional college programs. However, most of the federal funding intended to improve beginner teacher preparation is earmarked for alternative certification programs (Cochran-Smith et al., 2015). With that stated, studies by Gable, Sass, and Feng (2012) and Sass and Feng (2012) demonstrated that the amount and quality of special education teacher coursework in colleges, or otherwise is positively linked to the performance of teachers in special education classroom settings. Defining the connection point of teacher preparation and

student success is imperative considering the challenges many learning institutions face to satisfactorily staff special education classrooms and programs (Thapa et al., 2013). Annually, U.S. schools hire a high percentage of uncertified and unprepared teachers to staff special education programs and classrooms. Studies show that very few of these teachers stay employed (Lam et al., 2012; Major, 2012; Thapa et al., 2013). Additionally, as previously mentioned, attrition rates among newly graduated special education teachers with inadequate preparation is double that of those educators who underwent a more strenuous and traditional preparation program (Boe, 2014).

Furthermore, much of the research carried out in the last decade within the special education profession showed that traditional teacher preparation programs, including extensive field experience in the teacher's assigned area of specialty, is linked to teacher effectiveness (Cochran-Smith et al., 2015; Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014b; Sledge & Pazey, 2013). Florian (2013) stressed that teachers who serve students with special needs rely on a specialized body of knowledge and expertise that may be imparted more effectively through traditional preparation programs in which extended time is devoted to learning the necessary subject matter. However, opponents of traditional teacher education programs contend that lengthy certification mandates are expensive, time-consuming and deter suitable profession prospects (Leko, Brownell, Sindelar, & Murphy, 2012; Quealy, 2015).

Despite these criticisms, several studies of special education teacher preparation illustrate the advantages of rigorous traditional programs in the long run to yield student success (Sledge & Pazey, 2013). One such advantage is an extended period covering a

curriculum focused on pedagogical knowledge (Friedrich, 2014). Sledge and Pazey (2013) presented that traditional certification programs may better prepare special educators for the challenges of working with SEN students. Longer periods of studying pedagogical knowledge are applicable to many aspects of effective teacher preparation, including overall student success (Sledge & Pazey, 2013). In another study outlined by Leko et al. (2012), databases such as Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and the Teacher Follow-Up Survey (TFS) illustrated how demanding preparation lessened special education teacher attrition. Additionally, Feng and Sass (2011) used databases to become familiar with the influence special education preparation had on student success. Their findings included that students in special education classes whose teachers underwent extensive preparation were more successful than students whose teachers had not finished extensive preparatory teacher programs

Moreover, Leko et al. (2012) surveyed the influences of extensive special education preparation on teachers' lesson writing and classroom practices. One study associated beginner educators with minimal or no preparation to beginning teachers with extensive traditional preparation. The other study looked at classroom performances of beginning special education teachers who finished traditional or alternative paths. Within both studies, researchers discovered that educators who completed traditional preparatory routes outclassed educators in the comparison groupings. While these studies examined preparation programs routes, it should be noted that the targeted EBP was oriented to language proficiency (Leko et al., 2012).

However, data and perspectives of educational stakeholders are inconsistent regarding what constitutes high quality special education teacher preparation and whether that includes a traditional or alternative pathway to licensure (Anderson, 2016). Many educational stakeholders believe alternative licensure paths, including shortened, online coursework, are as effective as traditional licensure programs (Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014b). Others believe alternative coursework leading to licensure is not effective preparation for special education teachers. "Special education teacher training content, in general, and instruction for special education teachers . . . may not lend itself to [alternative] training via online delivery" (Marder & deBettencourt, 2012, p. 22).

The alternative licensure route. Alternative special education licensing programs, frequently specified as an alternative to longer college degree programs, are relatively prevalent in the United States. The National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET) (2015) and the Education Commission of the States (2016) reported that all states in America have alternate special education teacher licensing programs. Data show that because these programs are not lengthy and involve earlier job experiences for candidates (Boe, 2014), alternative licensure programs have larger recruitment compared to traditional teacher preparation programs (Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014b; Major, 2012; The Education Commission of the States, 2016). However, Johnson and Semmelroth (2014b) stressed that these accelerated alternative licensure programs do not give special education teachers the preparation needed to appropriately do the job required to cater to the demanding academic, emotional and behavioral challenges of SEN students in the alternative school setting. Furthermore, the

findings by Sass and Feng (2012) emphasized that a reduction in certification standards for teachers using an alternative methods may be counterproductive. Special education alternative licensure programs are encouraged to focus on effective instructional methods and aspects that influence these instructional methods to increase student success (Samson & Collins, 2012).

Additionally, the Education Commission of the States (2016) recommended that shortened special education licensure programs move toward a more targeted effort to focus on their quality and not merely their ease of completion. Studies have also indicated that special education teacher programs, both traditional and alternative licensure routes, be vigilant about the courses and content offered, guaranteeing the coursework does, in fact, prepare candidates (Vernon-Dotson e al., 2014). Gable, Sass, and Feng (2012) and Cochran-Smith et al. (2015) emphasized that regardless of the pathway, special educators must be prepared to handle the varied demographics of students in the alternative school setting. Legislative mandates, including IDEA (2004) and ESSA (2015) commanded prepared special educators be present in every U.S. special needs classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2016; NCES, 2015).

Although both traditional and alternative routes were discussed, Goldhaber and Liddle (2012) presented that teacher preparation programs within U.S. states, whether traditional or alternative, produced teachers who are “no more or less effective” (p. 3). Though Goldhaber and Liddle (2012) used information from district administration to connect instructors’ primary recommendations to student success on state assessments, they stressed that there is insufficient numerical data on how certain approaches for

educator preparedness related to eventual teacher effectiveness (Goldhaber & Liddle, 2012). Ultimately, Goldhaber and Liddle concluded that regardless of the route (traditional or alternative), there are immense "disparities in . . . quality" across U.S. teacher preparation programs (p. 4).

The Significance of Effective Special Education Teacher Preparation

With issues such as special educator shortages, attrition and poor preparation facing U.S. school districts, a basic reorganization of special education programming may be necessary to ensure that all alternative schools provide an effective and supportive education that meets the needs of its diverse students (Allday et al., 2013). Alquraini and Gut (2012) confirmed the significance of alternative school options as critical to ensuring school success for SEN students at risk of school failure. Additionally, studies supported that students who are at risk require prepared teachers to help them succeed in school (Gable et al., 2012). The significance of the link between teacher quality and student success cannot be overstated. Consider the following longitudinal study that tracked one million children from fourth grade into adulthood: Chetty et al. (2014) concluded that not only does a highly effective teacher lead to immediate student success but also that students placed in classrooms with prepared teachers have a greater probability of attending college. Additionally, these students have a greater chance of experiencing a better quality of life than those assigned to the least effective teachers. In another study, Darling-Hammond (2012) described the importance of a prepared educator:

> Educators know—and research confirms—that every aspect of school reform depends for its success on highly skilled teachers and principals, especially when

> the expectations of schools and the diversity of the student body increase. This may be the most important lesson learned in more than two decades of varied reforms to improve schools. Regardless of the efforts or initiative, teachers tip the scale toward success or failure. (p. 8)

Scholars have addressed several issues requiring urgency in special education teacher preparation programs. However, out of over 300 scholarly sources reviewed for this study, only a few referenced one of the greatest criticisms of teacher education preparatory programs: recruiting and retaining teachers that are not only effective, but ethnically diverse and prepared to act as mentors, activists, and leaders for underprivileged students (Wilson, 2015). Cramer (2015) illustrated distressing outcomes concerning how most minority students are taught by Caucasian, American women who have spent very little time with the diverse student population they are expected to teach. This significant part of teacher recruitment, retention and preparation brings to awareness the need for more U.S. special education teachers from various ethnic backgrounds (Scott, 2016). The next section of the chapter explores how special education teacher preparatory programs can effectively prepare all their candidates, according to recent literature and principles outlined in the theory of self-determination.

Preparing Special Educators to Know the Laws of Their Profession

In 2015, the U.S. Department of Justice (USDOJ) and the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE), in collaboration with the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), issued a cooperative public statement regarding the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The statement aligned with the Free and

Appropriate Public Education Act (FAPE), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, stipulating that every youth in America is entitled to a free, appropriate, and individualized education regardless of setting (The White House: Office of the Press Secretary, 2015; NICHCY, 2012). Moreover, research by Mallet (2014) and Roberts and Guerra (2017) suggested to guarantee every U.S. student receives a free, appropriate, and individualized education preparatory programs must prepare special educators to (a) understand the laws and definitions of IDEA; (b) comprehend how these laws apply to and affect their students.

According to Shinn (2015) and Schechter and Feldman (2013), understanding IDEA is vital for special educators because the mandates within the law safeguard the educational and civil rights of students with special needs. These rights include (a) support for psychological conditions (such as ACEs) that impede learning; (b) future transitional planning; (c) discipline measures within student IEPs to support and structure learning climates such as the juvenile justice system; (d) postgraduation employment and independent living situations (Osborne & Russo, 2014). Ultimately, to exclude or not educate a SEN student, regardless of the nature of the setting or special need, is not only a form of discrimination but breaking federal law (IDEA, 2004). Unfortunately, several studies explained that both special educators and administrators working in the alternative school setting commonly lack a basic comprehension of special education laws, namely IDEA, which has the potential to not only instigate litigation but obstruct student success. Special education teacher candidates would benefit from knowing the laws that direct their profession (Pazey & Cole, 2013; Roberts & Guerra, 2017).

Preparing Special Educators to Understand Their Student Population

Cochran-Smith et al. (2015) contended that current professional expectations and requirements for qualified special education teachers emphasize that teachers possess a clear understanding of the needs of their student population. Additionally, Florian (2014) noted the importance of understanding youth development and student learning in context as a basis for understanding the needs of SEN students. Florian (2014) continued, emphasizing that professional expectations and requirements are a relational process requiring teamwork and guidance. Furthermore, Moodley et al. (2015) recommended that school systems must have “awareness and insight to understand the shifting trends of special education” (p. vii). For example, globalization has amplified the need for schools, courts, university programs, and mental health organizations to work across cultures to generate effective policies and practices (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015; Cochran-Smith et al., 2015; Shin et al., 2016). Policies and practices that consider 21st-century educationally influenced issues such as immigration, poverty, unemployment, learning and mental disabilities, as well as cultural diversity. Since immigration, poverty, unemployment, cultural diversity and learning and mental disabilities are realities for students in the alternative school setting and affect student success, researchers stress that special education teacher candidates must be schooled in how to deal with such issues (Cochran-Smith et al., 2015; Moodley et al., 2013).

Most special educators in alternative settings are secluded, unsupervised, and unprepared to work with their student populations (Boe, 2014; Gagnon et al., 2012; Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014b; Major, 2012). Many lack basic teaching skills, are not

fully certified, and fail to understand and implement proper EBPs in their classrooms. The same can be said of many principals and administrators at the helm of alternative schools. Principals and administrators also lack knowledge of EBPs, making it a challenge to offer support and materials to the special educators they are expected to oversee (Lynch, 2012; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Roberts & Guerra, 2017).

Unidentified and unmet learning disabilities and emotional disturbances within the alternative school setting have a strong correlation to SEN students not finishing school (Mallet, 2013; NCES, 2012). An understanding of "learning disability" and "emotional disturbance"—as well as everything the terms entail—is crucial to special educators' preparation. To accomplish such tasks, special educators in the alternative setting should be aware of what is involved in educating the diverse population they serve. They should also possess a strong knowledge base of EBPs (Walker et al., 2015).

Furthermore, most of the literature generalized poor special education teacher programs and practices, referring to the issues as mere obstacles to alternative education school reform. Rueda and Stillman (2012) discussed that a driving force as to why most special education teachers enter the teaching profession unprepared to handle the academic and social emotional related problems of their student population (CDC, 2014; Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014b; Korenis & Billick, 2014; Jackson, 2016), is due to the specialization and compartmentalization feature of most teacher preparatory programs (Anderson, 2016; Rueda & Stillman, 2012). Compartmentalizing education programs (i.e., special vs. general) frequently hinders teacher candidates from collaborating, communicating, and sharing information (Rueda & Stillman, 2012). Accompanying these

dilemmas is finding knowledgeable and experienced people to head such programs. According to Pugach and Blanton (2012)—pulling from Anzaldua's (1987) seminal work—few educators are prepared to exist in the "borderlands"—places that permit teachers to not "be" either a special educator or general educator— "instead to become individuals who draw on and share multiple experiences and skills in an effort to create a new vision in an entirely new space" (as cited in Rueda & Stillman, 2012, p. 250).

Effective Special Education Teacher Preparatory Practices

According to Griner and Stewart (2013), special educators work under multi-faceted conditions, with diverse populations. With SEN students having diverse needs, such as (a) vast differences in capability, style of learning, and behavior; (b) ethnic backgrounds and languages; (c) needs stemming from disabilities; (d) emotional conditions that impede learning; (e) learning complicated by comorbidity (Wieringo, 2015), researchers stress that university special education teacher preparatory programs prepare their candidates to work with the student population (Samson & Collins, 2012). Professors of student educators should aim towards student success using personalized objectives and EBPs including collaborative skill building, high quality field experiences and the use of case study instruction (Wieringo, 2015). However, Rosenberg and Walther-Thomas (2014) pointed out that university teacher preparation programs are facing multiple demands to effectively prepare their candidates to work with the population in question. These demands include meeting state accreditation mandates that require substantial funding and resources (Rosenberg & Walther-Thomas, 2014).

Compounding matters are U.S. state inconsistencies regarding protocol in special educator certification requirements (Sledge & Pazey, 2013).

Researchers cannot merely address a simple question about whether a teaching practice is deemed effective; they must specify for whom the practice is effective and in what context. For instance, U.S. special education services include many categories of disabilities and what proves effective for one disability may not be effective for another. Table 1 below lists the disability categories within IDEA. Moreover, too often studies written about interventions for SEN students at risk of school failure and EBPs for them yield insignificant results because they are generalized and not categorized or disability-specific in nature (Florian, 2013; Maynard, McCrea, Pigott & Kelly, 2013). Equally discouraging is that although English Learners (EL) are entering U.S. schools at an exponential rate, U.S. teacher education preparatory programs fail to focus on essential and specific cultural and linguistic interventions and teaching practices for SEN students (Khong & Saito, 2014).

Table 1

Special Education Services Categorized According to IDEA (as cited in Lee, 2016)

Disabilities Covered Under IDEA—13 Categories					
Autism	Visual impairment, including blindness	Hearing impairment	Multiple disabilities. For example, a combined diagnosis of an emotional disturbance and ADHD.	Orthopedic impairment	Speech or language impairment
Deaf-blindness Deafness	Emotional disturbance	Intellectual disability, including mental retardation and giftedness.	Other health impairment (including ADHD)	Specific learning disability (including dyslexia)	Traumatic brain injury

An educator's knowledge base, methods preparation, and education are essential precursors to tailored student success, regardless of setting (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015; Gagnon et al., 2012). Moodley et al. (2013) stated, "Clearly, as globalization and internalization continue to intensify, it is imperative for educators and those working with students at risk to abandon their sense of self-sufficiency and actively increase their understanding of practices as they exist across systems, cultures, and nations" (p. 2-3).

To increase the success of SEN students, special education teachers' knowledge of EBPs must improve, as well as their confidence and preparation to implement them (Boe, 2014; Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014b; Major, 2012; O'Neil & Stephenson, 2012; Sledge & Pazey, 2013). Accordingly, research explains that engaging student teachers in

high-quality field experiences within appropriate settings, including diverse educational environments with a variety of supports, is a crucial preparation tool (Ronfeldt & Reininger, 2012). To determine how to better prepare special educators to instruct in diverse alternative settings, a review of the literature has identified areas of focus for more effective preparatory programs. Highlighted in the upcoming section are knowledge and skill areas considered essential and recommended by researchers (Cochran-Smith et al., 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2014) to incorporate into teacher preparation curriculum:

High quality field experiences. Effective special educator preparation and coursework requirements have statistically important influences on a teacher's eventual capability to promote gains in student success (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015). Yet, data indicates that current special education teacher candidates are receiving unsatisfactory supervised clinical preparation (DeMonte, 2015; Williamson & George, 2017). Changes within the coursework of undergraduate special education teachers in university education programs are necessary. Recommendations stress that university coursework provide preparation that ensures future special education teachers have a sound knowledge base and skillset to handle the diversity in learning linked to this population (DeMonte, 2015). Cochran-Smith and Villegas (2015) and Gable et al. (2012) stressed that this objective can be accomplished by engaging in high quality fieldwork. According to Cochran-Smith and Villegas (2015), high quality fieldwork is specific in nature and teaches educators to handle, prevent and intervene upon the mentioned student risk factors. High quality fieldwork teaches educators how to identify undiagnosed learning and emotional challenges of most SEN students found in the alternative school

setting (Boe, 2014; Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015; Gable et al., 2012). Additionally, Cornelius and Nagro (2014) asserted that prepared and knowledgeable special educators play imperative roles for students with special needs and their student success.

Moreover, Darling-Hammond (2014) and Ronfeldt and Reininger (2012) mentioned in their work that currently, rigorous clinical field experiences are considered a vital effort towards effective teacher preparation. U.S. policymakers are concentrating on improving clinical field experiences by extending the amount of time candidates spend in the classroom engaging in student teaching experiences (Darling-Hammond, 2014; Ronfeldt & Reininger, 2012). Ronfeldt and Reininger (2012) presented in their findings that field experiences are "[an] aspect of preparation that has the highest potential for effects on outcomes for students" (p. 180). Additionally, field experience is beneficial in supporting educators in the application of college coursework when paired with clinical work relevant to their studies (Cornelius & Nagro, 2014). Morewood and Condo (2012) and Darling-Hammond (2014) offered case study examples demonstrating how practical field experiences support quality teacher preparation. Evidently, as tangible approaches are presented in courses and thereafter applied within organized field experiences, student educators advance their knowledge base of EBPs and confidence to use them in classrooms. The application of field experiences is an important instrument to offering student educators opportunities to apply knowledge within real teaching situations (Williamson & George, 2017). Field experiences that are planned to facilitate student educators' application of EBPs as established throughout their coursework appear to work best for increasing student teachers' self-efficacy, perceptions of aptitude, lesson

planning, and classroom performance (Cochran-Smith et al., 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2014).

With regards to effective field experience preparation possibilities for special educators, a study by Teagarden et al. (2013) offered specific preparation in dealing with youth with specific learning disabilities and emotional disturbances. Such a specific preparation program would call for clinical hours in a mental health facility for adolescents. Another study presented the field experience preparation option of an internship in a correctional facility for youth where special education teacher students work towards a specialization in juvenile justice special education licensure (Gagnon et al., 2012).

Assuring special educator student candidates are prepared to teach SEN students possessing emotional and behavioral disorders, as well as severe learning disabilities requires experience and specific applied training (Teagarden et al., 2013). Ultimately, university programs need to be held accountable for preparing their special education teachers to enter the field equipped to do their job. Discourse suggests that applicable field experiences are valuable in meeting this goal (Teagarden et al., 2013). Moreover, while much of the literature recommended the use of high quality field experiences as beneficial to preparing future teachers, Gansle, Noell, and Burns (2012) expressed that there are many other operational essentials to be considered when studying the impact of teacher preparation and its successful components (i.e., field experiences). For instance, the consistency of data systems available that link students to certain programs is an imperative component (Gansle et al., 2012). Further information about students may also

be needed such as attendance records, socioeconomic status and/or disability category. In addition to the difficulties linked to data accessibility, investigating consequential methodological challenges, inconsistencies, and the interpretation of student scores that are reflective of the quality of their teachers' work, are also components to consider (Gansle et al., 2012). Furthermore, the number of qualitative studies about special education teacher preparedness in relation to quantitative studies on the topic appeared unbalanced in the literature. Most researchers chose a qualitative research approach. Few studies used a mixed method design to study teacher preparation.

Collaborative skill-building. Although there are many similarities in the responsibilities of general educators and special educators, there are several significant differences. For example, special educators are characteristically expected to (a) collaborate with general educators and other service providers; (b) communicate regularly with students' guardians; (c) develop and provide oversight in implementing students' IEPs; (d) be knowledgeable of special education laws and policies; and (e) oversee paraprofessionals (Baeten & Simons, 2014; Brownell et al., 2012). Knowing how to collaborate is a major part of a special educator's job, and studies show it is also a key factor in effective instruction for students with special needs (INTASC, 2013; Schulte, 2013). Still, Shady et al. (2013) noted that teachers who lacked collaborative skills reported significant challenges in coteaching. While Shady et al. (2013) surveyed the difficulties, teachers faced with collaboration in the classroom, they failed to look at the inadequate study amongst the efficiency of collaborative teaching and the concrete schoolroom practices used to achieve student success.

However, Shin et al. (2016) closely examined teachers' classroom collaboration undertakings to recognize methods for refining teacher preparation. In reviewing 11 studies, it was discovered that both special education and general education teachers alleged (a) collaborative instructional methods offered them time to discuss student issues and share valuable information; (b) the influence personality had on their ability to collaborate; (c) the difficulties in applying collaborative teaching approaches. Moreover, special education student teachers mentioned a lack of content knowledge, while general education student teachers stated a need for additional preparation regarding student accommodations and modifications. Ultimately, special educators require substantial preparation in knowledge and skills required to collaborate with their colleagues (Shady et al., 2013; Shin et al., 2016).

Numerous approaches have been shown to be effective in developing the collaboration skills of special educators, and educational teacher preparation programs are recommended by researchers to use them (Aelterman, 2013; Bineham, Shelby, Pazey, & Yates, 2014). One strategy to build a special educator's collaboration skills includes pairing general and special education student teachers in collaborative instructional situations, emphasizing collaboration as a focal point of the course (Shin et al., 2016). Moolenaar, Sleegers, and Daly (2012) presented a case study of collaboration among educators where teachers worked collaboratively to build their teaching methods designed to enhance student learning in their classrooms. The research uncovered important links between teacher collaboration, student success, and educational change. Moreover, an expectation of special education teachers is to work with other service

providers, such as the school nurse, to meet the wide variety of student needs (Brownell et al., 2012).

The most critical and challenging relationships are among special education teachers and their general education teaching partners (Shin et al., 2016). Sharing responsibility for a group of students, as well as space, resources, and instructional time requires a sophisticated level of collaboration that exceeds what is typically required of general education teachers (Shin et al., 2016). Unfortunately, given the complex schedules and time demands of the teachers, it is difficult for teachers to have a dedicated period for collaboration (Baeten & Simons, 2014). The general education teacher normally shares lesson plans electronically so that the special education teacher takes responsibility for planning modifications and accommodations (Aelterman, 2013; Shin et al., 2016). Ensuring the successful implementation of the appropriate modifications for each student, given the number of students and classes, can be challenging, making collaboration a must between professionals (Moolenaar et al., 2012).

The use of case study instruction. Educational scholars highlight how a student who is engaged in their educational experiences learns and retains more (Ates, 2012). A recognized practice used by teacher preparatory programs to achieve student engagement is case study instruction (Darling-Hammond, 2014; Kennedy, Newton, Haines, Walther-Thomas, & Kellems, 2012; McRae, 2012). With the use of case study instruction, student teachers are given invented narratives concerning a student or classroom situation and then expected to address concerns within the instance emphasized by the instructor (Darling-Hammond, 2014). The application of coursework is typically involved in case

study instruction. For example, students might be asked to explain how they would approach the situation in relation to course content. Researchers have studied the application of case study instruction with special education student teachers and were found successful. For instance, McRae (2012) demonstrated how the use of clinical case studies deepened and solidified students' understanding of concepts in a doctoral program. Additionally, case study instruction was found to be helpful to the same students for content teaching that typically complemented the traditional approach of lecture and textbook reading. Another study by Ates (2012) exposed several advantages to the use of case study instruction, including improved cooperative group work and increased class participation.

In a third study, Hooper (2014) focused on case study instruction and emphasized that student teachers could exercise learned strategies within a secure setting where possible errors were not problematic. A fourth study, Moldavsky, Groenewald, Owen and Sayal (2013) emphasized that case study instruction helped teachers better conceptualize students' challenges. Furthermore, case study instruction is compared to problem-based learning where the knowledge comes before the problem. The focal point of case study instruction is to apply knowledge instead of recalling content (Darling-Hammond, 2014). Several fields, such as medical and law, case study instruction is used in coursework to support students to strengthen their study skills through engagement in the examination of preselected cases. Numerous effective educator preparatory programs use case study instruction; whereas applicants review cases of students that specifically focus on practical student challenges that will typically be confronted in the classroom. Challenges

such as behavioral problems, parental conflict and student assessment (Darling-Hammond, 2014).

While many advantages exist for case study instruction, there are also drawbacks including inadequate motivation to implement and prepare for the teaching approach (Herreid & Schiller, 2013). Also, appropriate resources are needed to appropriately prepare quality case study instruction to create successful student outcomes, which requires time and extended planning. Furthermore, Herreid and Schiller (2013) and Roehl, Reddy, and Shannon (2013) exemplified that students have been resistant to the innovative instructional techniques of case study instruction. Additionally, some teachers expressed concerns regarding appropriately covering course content with the use of case study instruction. Lastly, case study instruction has been found to be an inappropriate approach for teaching students concrete concepts (Herreid & Schiller, 2013).

Chapter Summary

Several gaps in the literature were identified throughout the chapter, including (a) a gap in the research on special educator preparation and proficient practice; (b) the limited availability of EBPs for the instructional purposes of special education teachers (Cook et al., 2015; Greenberg, Walsh & McKee, 2013); (c) the inadequacy and vague research regarding clear alternative education program practices, definitions, and instructional standards special education teachers are expected to use (Porowski et al., 2014; Sass & Feng, 2012). A detailed section on quality special education teacher preparation and how it influences student success was acknowledged as well. This acknowledgement provided the groundwork for the study's conceptual framework—self-

determination theory, to examine the identified gaps with the intent to extend knowledge in the discipline. A history of alternative schools and the population of students the setting largely serves was given for background knowledge on SEN students, the targeted population of the study.

Furthermore, topics crucial to effective special education teacher preparation in the alternative school setting as well as research-based methods deemed effective were mentioned and will be elaborated upon in Chapter 5 under the recommendations section. Furthermore, this literature review addressed many of the key aspects of preparing special education teachers to instruct in the alternative school setting. Successful special education teachers collaborate and work toward a common cause: student success. Positive social change is likely when educational stakeholders listen and learn from the voices and perceptions of those on the frontlines: teachers.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

Most special education teachers who enter the profession are unprepared to handle the academic and socioemotional related problems of their student population (Jackson, 2016; Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014b; Korenis & Billick, 2014). This lack of preparation occurs due to decreasing certification standards and insufficient knowledge and skills provided by teacher education preparation programs (Aragon, 2016; Greenberg et al., 2014). The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of special educators teaching in alternative high school settings concerning their classroom instructional preparation and proficient use of EPBs to educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure. Through the examination and analysis of the interview responses, I hoped to determine special educators' perceptions, as guided by SDT, regarding their educational preparation and EBP proficiency to increase student success rates. The data collected may help to improve special educator preparation methods needed to educate this diverse population. The sections of the chapter include the following: (a) research design and rationale, (b) researcher's role, (c) methodology, (d) instrumentation, (e) data analysis plan, (f) issues of trustworthiness, and (g) ethical procedures. The goal of the study was to address the research questions listed below:

Research Questions

The following research questions, as guided by SDT, were addressed in the qualitative study:

RQ1: What are the perceptions of special educators teaching in alternative high school settings concerning their classroom instructional preparation to effectively educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure?

RQ2: How do special educators teaching in alternative high school settings perceive their preparation to proficiently practice EBPs in the classroom to educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure?

Research Design and Rationale

Special education teachers are entering the teaching profession unprepared to meet the diverse needs of students with special educational requirements. This issue is influencing teacher high attrition rates and poor SEN student success (Boe, 2014; Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014a; Major, 2012). Special educators' perceptions of how unpreparedness affects their students' educational success are not easily acknowledged using a quantitative research process; hence, a phenomenological research approach within a qualitative framework was selected to study the perceptions of the special educators.

The focus of a phenomenological approach was used to explore the participants' experiences of the phenomenon under investigation. The pursuit of understanding is associated with people's desires to personally, socially, and culturally share their stories and their meanings (Seidman, 2006). This method of research was chosen to understand the essence of a phenomenon through the examination of the views of the individuals experiencing it (Sherman & Webb, 1988). My selection of phenomenology instead of a case study, grounded theory, or ethnography (participant observation) rested on several

reasons including (a) the ability to explore an unquantifiable subject that is indefinite, (b) the ability to distill the complexity of the phenomenon into manageable parts (themes), (c) the ability to understand the context and environment where the phenomenon occurs, and (d) the ability to explain links to or mechanisms within the phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The Role of the Researcher

The following information encompassed my role as the researcher: (a) I conducted each interview with the study's participants; (b) I was not acquainted with, nor have worked with, any of the subjects being interviewed; (c) I have never taught in an alternative school setting; thereby, neutrality and impartiality was maintained in the study; and (d) I sought the guidance of my chair and committee to assist with the participant selection, interviewing progression, questions, and data analysis. I eliminated possible bias within the research through these measures, which increased the study's strength. Moreover, in working with my chair and committee, any questions regarding the study's ethics and fairness were resolved (Mayer, 2015).

While performing qualitative research, bias from the researcher is a concern and possibility throughout data collection, coding, and analysis. Though I did my best to remain objective and validate the study's outcomes, the qualitative inductive inquiry involved was shaped by my preconceptions, standards, and familiarities (Patton, 2002). Application of these ideologies as I interviewed, documented, coded, and analyzed the participants' interview results was a factor. However, these components helped mold the study's analysis and findings, adding to the study's significance. Nevertheless, I framed

how my possible predeterminations influenced the study. By keeping accurate records and detailed field notes, I was able to clarify such issues during the study, which helped to corroborate the legitimacy of the concluding research results and analysis (Mayer, 2015). Additionally, the interviews were not conducted within my work environment. They were conducted in a school setting where conflicts of interest and justification for the use of incentives do not exist.

Methodology

I employed a qualitative, phenomenological approach using individual, face-to-face, semistructured interviews with 12 special education teachers who taught in the alternative school setting. The objective of this approach was to understand how the participants made meaning of their experiences and to collect data reflective of their interpretations. I selected a qualitative framework over a quantitative and mixed-methods methodology because (a) a qualitative approach allowed the exploration of the meaning of a social problem that is not numerically quantifiable, (b) a qualitative approach allowed a process of research involving the emergence of specific to general themes, and (c) a qualitative research approach allowed the researcher to make data interpretations (Sherman & Webb, 1988). Furthermore, I selected a phenomenological approach for this study over other qualitative approaches because I hoped to describe daily, lived experiences of a phenomenon and, to do so, a phenomenological research approach permitted comprehensive analysis (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002). Phenomenological researchers attempt to understand human behavior through the lens of the participants, and due to the unique nature of the school's environment, a phenological

study was fitting for social change. Additionally, I believed a phenomenologist's worldview aligned with the belief that "all perceptions and constructions are ultimately grounded in a particular perspective in time [21st-century] and space [unique in nature study site]" (Simon & Goes, 2011, p. 1).

Participant Selection Logic

The study had 12 special education teachers as participants. The small population of special education teachers permitted me the chance to collect concentrated information from the participants (Babbie, 2015). The sample size was drawn from one alternative school setting. Random invitations to participate were given to those special education teachers who agreed in writing to voluntarily participate. The study was limited to special education teachers based because many who are currently entering the teaching profession are unprepared to teach within alternative school settings (Boe, 2014; Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014b; Major, 2012). The exclusion of general education teachers (those who do not have licensure to teach special needs students) would put the emphasis on the perceptions of special education teachers. I contacted participants via their school e-mail accounts, and, through this form of communication, I made each participant aware of the study's criteria. I used further e-mail exchanges when the participants had issues of ambiguity or further questions regarding the study and its criteria.

Measures were used to determine when the study had completed its course, such as (a) satisfactory quantities to reflect the target population and (b) enough data saturation where I was not finding something unusual or extraordinary from the sampling (Seidman, 2006). Data saturation is determined by the study's sample size and the depth of the rich

data needed (Fusch & Ness, 2015). The use of probing questions was applied. Also, I provided several chances for the participants to add, change, clarify, enhance, or revise their statements following the initial interview supported to ensure rich data collection. Upon completion and approval of the institutional review board (IRB) application, I e-mailed and called the principal of the school site and (a) discussed and clarified the study's procedures and worth and (b) discussed and agreed where the special education teachers could access the study' purpose, criteria, and participation guidelines.

The interviews with the participants took place at the school site. Beforehand, the special education teachers received (e-mail or hand delivered) a copy of the "Consent to Participate in Research" form. Participants were also made aware that (a) they would receive a pseudonym (b) they would not be identifiable by name throughout all stages of the study; (c) they had a choice to partake in the study, not to take part in the study, and/or agree to take part, but later decide to drop out; (d) their decision not to take part in the study would not be held against them; (e) they could inquire about any concerns they felt essential prior to committing to participate in the study; (f) they could communicate with me regarding any questions or concerns that arose during the data collection process, and do so at a personal level.

Instrumentation

The instruments required for this research methodology included a prepared interview protocol related to each research question and included in the appendix. Face-to-face interviews, ranging from 45-60 minutes were used and were the only data collecting instrument. To assure accurateness, the interviews were recorded with a small,

electronic device. Every participant was made aware of this device and consented to its use before being interviewed. I transcribed all interviews immediately following each one with several checks for accuracy. My chair, committee and I only had contact with the recorded material.

Interview Questions

To gather the perceptions and experiences of special educators regarding their preparation to teach in the alternative school setting,
several questions intended to encourage each teacher to speak openly were designed. Seidman's (2006) mentioned that interview procedures must be correctly aligned with the study's research questions. The interview questions should also be understood and defined within the context of participant's recollection of her personal experiences. The interview questioning of this study attempted to lay a grounding for understanding the following: perceptions of special educators teaching in alternative high school settings about their classroom instructional preparation to educate SEN students who are at risk of school failure. "Why" questions, were not be used. Instead, the questions focused on prompting explanations via "how" questions to encourage the participants to share their perceptions and experiences. The appropriateness of the data collection instrument to answer the research questions was established in the following (a) the selected instrumentation permitted greater understanding; (b) the selected instrumentation allowed for more personalization and higher response rates; (c) the selected instrumentation permitted control over the order and flow of questions; (d) the selected instrumentation was appropriate for collecting intricate data with a greater quantity of information based

on opinion (Abawi, 2013). Content validity was established by reaching data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

After IRB approval from Walden University, the certified special educators were recruited for participation by receiving an e-mail requesting participation. The school principal and superintendent of the identified school received a letter requesting consent. The letter explained that participation was voluntary and that participant's rights were protected during and after data collection. After consent was obtained, individual teachers received an email at their school e-mail address. The e-mail explained the nature of the study, the purpose of the study, and requested an informed consent for volunteer teachers to participate in the study. The informed consent received by participants included information regarding the researcher and Walden University's role in the research. The consent explained to participants' information about the selection process of participants, the purpose of the research, and benefits of participation. Participants were also informed of possible threats, assured confidentiality, provided reassurance that they could dismiss themselves from the study at any time, and contact information of the researcher. Participants could opt to e-mail or mail a signed consent form to indicate their willingness to participate and their understanding of assurances and confidentiality of their responses, names, or other personally identifying factors. The data was collected from the selected and consented school site by the researcher. Each participant was interviewed one time. Data was audio recorded. Once teachers completed the interview,

they were acknowledged for their participation with a thank you. A continuation plan was not initiated because recruitment was not low.

Data Analysis Plan

I used NVivo software to organize, classify, and categorize the data. I analyzed the interviews under the guidance of my chair, committee, my University Research Review, and the Walden Research Center. Working in conjunction with these entities guaranteed the study's research methods were aligned with Walden University guidelines and expected requirements to satisfy the needed criteria for a valid and unbiased qualitative study (Mayer, 2015). Regarding the manner of treatment of data discrepancies, my committee was consulted to help with distinguishing between what information is pertinent to the study and what was not.

Following each interview, the field notes were organized and maintained in a diary. Relevant information about the participants, setting, and the overall tone were recorded. Subsequently, once the interview recordings were transcribed, raw data from the interview transcriptions were read multiple times as I grasped a sense of the ideas and perceptions of the participants. I then began the process of organizing and coding the data.

Savin-Baden and Major (2013) explained that as the researcher begins to review the data, he or she begins to see actions, approaches, behaviors, tones, relationships, and patterns. I put the data through two cycles of coding: initial coding and axial coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Kester, 2011). Initial coding emphasizes that the researcher takes additional time to conceptualize the data, possibly line by line, and generates

numerous codes related to the information (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Axial coding, or second-phase coding, then takes place as the researcher makes connections and creates categories from the initial codes. The categories coincided and were responsive to the research questions. Following coding and categorizing, I converted the categories into themes. A theme is a uniting or central idea in the data and is the core of data analysis (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). A visual representation of the themes is displayed in a table in Chapter 4. The table presents a shortened description of the data and a recap of the results. Ultimately, the development of the themes and a summary of the findings helped move the research process toward data interpretation.

NVivo Software Use

To support my data collection, I used NVivo software to support the organization, categorization, and classification of the data gathered from the interviews. NVivo software helped manage the documentation from my study. The benefits of NVivo software included the following: (a) it offered other researchers a chance to adjust, alter, enhance, or deduct information more competently and professionally over shorthand records; (b) it removed arbitrarily transcription that could be challenging to infer or distinguish by somebody else looking over the data; and (c) the NVivo software was supportive in finalizing data transcripts and inquiry (Patton, 2002).

Emerging Patterns and Themes

After conducting the interviews of the participants, I analyzed the data to see if any common patterns or themes emerge. Themes examples included happenings, concerns, significances, or knee-jerk thoughts, as rendered with NVivo software and

commonalities experienced when coding with it. Collective patterns and themes discovered in the participants' interviews helped to support my theories in this research study (Patton, 2002).

Patterns and Themes Analysis

After all the data were collected, I analyzed the data for possible themes, keeping in mind the following (a) authentic qualitative analysis is richly descriptive; (b) in qualitative investigations, researchers become an "instrument" for collecting data and (c) the outcomes of a research study are dependent on the researcher's overall experiences and perspectives (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, my analysis of the themes discovered in the interviews were guided by (a) reflexivity; (b) awareness of the preconceptions, principles, and experiences I brought to the study; (c) how such understandings form the results and interpretations drawn from them (Janesick, 2011).

Issues of Trustworthiness

A challenge for any researcher is being aware of personal bias and how the credibility of the research could be threatened by it. Reactivity is also a factor to consider (Maxwell, 2013). To eliminate possibilities of both, I (a) refrained from selectively including data that merely fit a preconceived outcome or expectation; (b) participant verification of accuracy in what was stated was done through data summaries. Concerning reactivity, otherwise described as an investigator's influence throughout the interview process, this is difficult to attain as an interviewer is not completely unable to not lead or direct interview answers. For example, if an interviewee strays completely from the question, in per say, a political or ethical manner. To avoid leading the

participants in any one desired direction, I understood and was aware of how my preferences as a teacher and researcher influenced the participants (Maxwell, 2013).

Credibility

Concerning credibility, it was accomplished through prolonged interaction with every special education teacher involved in the study (i.e., interviews, e-mail, data summary reviews) to form rich descriptions of the phenomenon being studied. Areas of ambiguity or speculation were described, noted and labeled (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014).

Transferability

Transferability, otherwise stated as applying research results to other contexts, requires cautious data clarification. Simply combining or synthesizing two or three earlier results with the current study is not appropriate. Careful data interpretation is possible if there are detailed descriptions that permit knowledgeable contrasts. Also, careful data interpretation is a possibility if a varied sample from which the information originally came from is used (Miles et al., 2014).

Dependability

Dependability in research regards reliability and solidity (Miles et al., 2014). Additionally, having a review (audit trail) conducted by my committee and chair will support reassurance of dependability (Cope, 2014). Furthermore, conformability in interview protocol is linked to reactivity threats, as stated earlier, which required reflexivity and being aware of theoretical expectations concerning the entirety of the

research methods (Maxwell, 2013). My committee members' assessment supported in reassuring coding reliability.

Ethical Procedures

Sound ethical direction concerning my fieldwork was set forth by an outline: (a) the value and possible influence of the study; (b) my capability as a researcher and interviewer; (c) gathering of informed consent; (d) release of information; (e) advantages to the involved special education teachers and forthcoming researchers (Miles et al., 2014). Study expense and reciprocity was also measured, in addition to risks to the special education teachers participating in the study.

A relationship grounded in integrity between the researcher and participants was built by using additional ethical procedures (a) protecting participant confidentiality and anonymity; (b) not persuading participants with the promotion of a theme or hidden agenda; (c) applying honesty and excellence at all times; (d) taking ownership of the information collected, the study's results, as well as the management and mismanagement of the study's outcomes (Miles et al., 2014, p. 58-66).

Institutional Review Board Documents

This study was conducted according to guidelines stipulated by the IRB code of behavior and was approved by Walden University, as well as the school district and school site in question. All forms used for the study were filed in agreement with all agencies. A copy of my completed National Institutes of Health Office of Extramural Research course accreditation was turned in with every application signifying that I am competent to perform research on human beings, as well as recognize the study's

limitations and implications. Additionally, as previously mentioned, each participant was allowed a pseudonym.

Ethical Concerns

To evade ethical concerns in the recruitment course, during participant contact or with school site personnel, I was held with the accountability for the process of collecting the study's data. Field notes and transcripts were placed within my home office computer under password needed software. The fieldwork involved in the study involved unpredictability and fluidity; whereas participants were allowed (a) to leave the study before it concluded; (b) object to questions, or (c) refrain from answering questions that caused discomfort. Also, participants who raised objections to specific questioning were permitted to abstain from answering it. However, this did not occur.

Treatment of Data

All data remained confidential. Participants were made aware that others within the school were participating in the study and all data collection remained protected and private. A summary of the research was offered to each involved special education teacher for their review after all interviews were transcribed. After the research study was concluded, the information will be securely stored for five years. After this period, it will be shredded and discarded. As previously discussed, conflicts of any sort do not exist within the study.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to increase the understanding of the perceptions and experiences of special education teachers teaching in an alternative school setting

concerning their work towards achieving student success. In consideration of the research questions, I employed a qualitative approach utilizing individual, face-to-face, semistructured interviews. Additional information was obtained from relevant school documents such as the school guidebook and website to better understand the policies and background of the alternative school. An analysis of data involving the participants' perceptions was conducted. Before all interviews and the gathering of information, consent was pursued from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study. The study was explained to the participants. Written consent was also requested from every participant, and interviews were conducted at a time convenient to them. Each interview session was audio recorded. The recordings were transcribed, and the transcripts read multiple times prior to coding and identifying themes. I attempted to answer the research questions through analyzing the patterns, descriptions, and themes interpreted from the coded data to obtain knowledge of the special educators' perceptions, practices, and experiences teaching in the alternative school setting. Chapter 4 presents the following (a) a summarized and comprehensive review of the study's results; (b) an explanation of the analysis process; (c) parts of the interview transcriptions meant to determine the special education teachers' perceptions. Chapter 4 presents interview responses that were connected and combined with the study's research questions and reinforced with data.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to identify the perceptions of special educators, as guided by SDT, concerning their preparation to effectively educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure. Most special education teachers entering the profession are not prepared by teacher education programs to handle the academic and social-emotional related problems of their student population (Jackson, 2016; Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014b; Korenis & Billick, 2014) due to decreasing certification standards and insufficient knowledge and skills, such as applying self-determination to educational practice (Aragon, 2016; Greenberg et al., 2014). The perceptions of special educators, as guided by aspects of SDT, of teaching in alternative high school settings and their preparation to educate SEN students who are at risk of school failure are unknown. Ultimately, the insufficient knowledge and skills in U.S. educator preparatory programs are problematic to the success of SEN students.

Research Questions

The following research questions, as guided by SDT, were explored in the qualitative study.

RQ1: What are the perceptions of special educators teaching in alternative high school settings concerning their classroom instructional preparation to effectively educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure?

RQ2: How do special educators teaching in alternative high school settings perceive their preparation to proficiently practice EBPs in the classroom to educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure?

I explored the answers to these research questions to gain knowledge regarding the perceptions of special educators teaching in an alternative high school setting concerning their classroom instructional preparation to educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure. Additionally, the participants' demonstrated how they attempted to achieve student success in their district within an alternative school setting. From the participants' interviews, I found that special educators had similar priorities and concerns, and they use comparable teaching methods to achieve student success. This chapter includes an overview of the study, the setting of the interviews, participant demographics, and analysis of the data. NVivo qualitative software was used to input and analyze collected data, generate codes, and establish themes. I also explain how the characteristics related to trustworthiness was balanced in the study. Finally, the key themes, subthemes, and a summary are included in this chapter.

Setting

I interviewed each of the special education teachers who participated in the study at the school site in a private room away from other employees. The school site was in San Juan County, New Mexico. No other people were present during each interview. All interviews were uninterrupted, and none of the participants were called away during any of the interview sessions. Each interview was conducted face-to-face while being

recorded with a digital audio recorder. Additionally, because the interview questions were based on the participant's individual experiences, organizational influences such as changes in school policies, personnel, budget or staff cuts, or other events were unlikely to have influenced the participants' responses. The interview questions were designed to produce personal and individualized responses to the questions, which was the main reason that those conditions were not a factor in their responses (see Appendix A).

Participant Demographics

The participants interviewed for the study were from varying generations, including (a) Baby Boomers, (b) Generation X, and (c) Millennials (Appendix B: Demographics of the Participants). The participants ranged from age 24 to age 67, and each generation was represented. All 12 of the participants were special educators from different content areas and educational pathways. Table 2 below displays participants' ages and educational backgrounds.

Table 2

Participant Age and Educational Pathway

Participants	Participant Number	Percentage Overall
Baby Boomer (age 53-71)	5	42%
Generation Y (age 30-52)	5	42%
Millennialist (age 18-29)	2	17%
Alternative path (undergrad)	3	42%
Alternative path (graduate)	2	17%
Traditional path (undergrad)	4	33%
Traditional path (graduate)	3	42%

Data Collection

I conducted and audio recorded 12 semistructured, face-to-face interviews with special education teachers from various generations and teacher licensure pathways. All interviews were conducted at a school site in Farmington, New Mexico. I allowed 60-90 minutes for each interview. The length of each interview ranged in time between 35-65 minutes. All of the participants answered all of the questions. I interviewed each participant only once, asking all 10 questions consecutively until the interview was complete. Immediately following the interviews, I transcribed the participants' responses and submitted the data into the NVivo qualitative research software for coding and analysis of patterns and themes. After member checking the data with the participants and analyzing the responses, I established 10 emergent themes and six subthemes from the data collected. The data collection plan outlined in Chapter 3 remained the same; there were no discrepancies, inconsistencies, or unusual circumstances. The names of the

participants were not used; instead, I labeled P1 to P12 (P for participant). Thus, special educator 1 = P1, special educator 2 = P2, and so forth.

Data Analysis

The data collection involved interviews focused on the lived experiences of the participants regarding their perceptions of preparation and practices, as guided by SDT and focused on student success, to effectively educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure. The themes and subthemes were analyzed from quoted phrases from the participant responses. The similarities in answers were broken down into categories.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Member checking increases the reliability and trustworthiness of research findings (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Data saturation also enhances the validity and credibility of research findings. Data saturation is the process of data collection to the point where the findings overlap, or the same information continues to occur. By employing both member checking and data saturation, the credibility of my research study was heightened (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Trustworthiness was maintained by (a) refraining from selectively including data that fit a preconceived outcome or expectation, (b) carrying out participant verification of accuracy in what was stated through data summaries, and (c) understanding and being aware of how my preferences as a teacher and researcher influenced the participants (Maxwell, 2013).

Credibility

Credibility was accomplished through member checking and prolonged interaction with every special education teacher involved in the study (i.e., interviews, e-mail, data summary reviews) to form rich descriptions of the phenomenon being studied. Areas of ambiguity or speculation were described, noted, and labeled (Miles et al., 2014).

Transferability

The findings of this study may be transferable to special education teachers who decide to implement a more exhaustive inquiry into their perceptions on effective preparation and practice for student success within their profession. Such inquiries will help special educators gain a better understanding of some of the underlying reasons for unpreparedness in the teaching profession, as well as implementing effective EBPs for advancing the student success of students in the alternative school setting who are at risk of school failure. The strength of the information and documentation of the common themes will aid the special educators with data that they can use for transferability to their school districts and individual school sites with their students and colleagues. Transferability was maintained by cautious data clarification.

Confirmability

The confirmability of a research study is reinforced by descriptive note taking, as well as member checking of the interview questions (Yin, 1994). I took notes during each interview. I reviewed and compared my notes to the detailed transcripts of the digital tape recordings. Member checking was used with the participants to confirm a more accurate analysis of the data gathered from the interviews. Researcher bias was eliminated by (a) I

conducted each interview with the study's participants; (b) I was not acquainted with, nor have worked with, any of the subjects being interviewed; (c) I have never taught in an alternative school setting; thereby, neutrality and impartiality was maintained in the study as well. Confirmability was also maintained by being aware of theoretical expectations concerning the entirety of the research methods (Maxwell, 2013).

Dependability

Dependability reinforces the reliability of a qualitative research study (Patton, 2002). Employing two or more data collection methods increases the dependability of the data collection (Yin, 1994). In this study, I achieved data saturation of the data collected and used member checking to increase dependability. Data saturation occurred by interviewing a total of 12 out of 12 participants**,** which was the maximum number of participants. Additionally, dependability was maintained in the study through consistency in the research process. Caution was also taken during data collection, as well as while interpreting the findings and reporting results to maintain dependability (Cope, 2014).

Results

After recording, transcribing, and analyzing the responses from the 12 participants, I submitted the information into the NVivo qualitative research software for analysis. Several patterns, themes, and subthemes emerged. The NVivo software (and my interview notes) uncovered similarities in the participants' responses. Those similarities in both the responses and categories permitted an arrangement of individual participant answers into categories of themes and subthemes. I found more compatible patterns and themes than discrepancies in the responses. Moreover, I found few irregularities and

minor discrepancies from the interview responses among the participants. For all of the themes and subthemes, the participants answered similarly on most of the interview questions. Furthermore, these general themes and subthemes from the interview responses were consistent regardless of the participant's age or generation. Additionally, the themes and subthemes were derived after achieving data saturation, which occurred after the seventh interview. Table 3 listed below presents an overview of the themes and subthemes that emerged from the collected data.

Table 3

Responses to Themes and Subthemes

Theme/subtheme	Participant responses	Percentage of responses	Linked to RQ1	Linked to RQ2
1 Colleague collaboration	12/12	100%	Yes	Yes
1a Weekly collaboration	11/12	92%	Yes	Yes
1b Coteach	10/12	83%	Yes	Yes
2 Student connection	12/12	100%	Yes	Yes
2a Target self-esteem	11/12	92%	Yes	Yes
2b Promote autonomy	10/12	83%	Yes	Yes
3 Healthy setting	10/12	83%	Yes	Yes
4 High expectations	9/12	75%	Yes	Yes
5 Language focus	8/12	67%	Yes	Yes
6 Structure	9/12	75%	yes	Yes
7 Relevancy	8/12	67%	Yes	Yes
8 Community support	8/12	67%	Yes	Yes
9 Individualized instruction	9/12	75%	Yes	Yes
9a Student background	11/12	92%	Yes	Yes
10 Technology	8/12	67%	Yes	Yes
10a Technology engagement	8/12	67%	Yes	Yes

Emergent Theme 1: The Importance of Collaborating with Colleagues

The first emergent theme identified from the participants was the importance of collaborating with colleagues to achieve student success. P2 stated, “We’re a community (work together towards a common goal—kids succeeding) school that works as a team.” This theme answered both research questions relating to (a) the perceptions of special educators teaching in alternative high school settings concerning their classroom instructional preparation to effectively educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure and (b) how special educators teaching in alternative high school settings perceive their preparation to proficiently practice EBPs in the classroom to educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure. Participant responses regarding the importance of collaborating emerged unanimously from Interview Question 5 (What do you do to meet the special educational needs of your students in content area lessons?) The participants noted that maintaining a strong and open relationship with their colleagues helped them to (a) be better educators, (b) prepare effective lessons, and (c) more readily meet students’ needs. The participants’ statements below support these statements.

Collaborating with colleagues helps participants to be better educators. P5 stated,

> well, I have more than a few ways (to meet student needs) (pause), because I can have trouble coming from a different state, relating to my kids and it wasn’t a thing that got better and I felt the need to improve myself and because the district wants higher test scores, I knew I needed to start meeting (pause), with other

teachers, so, now we meet once a week for PLC (Professional Learning Communities) where we share how to do stuff and it has really helped me a lot.

P5 stated,

I feel where I get my resources and support, my little pat on the back are in-house, my principal and the other teachers. They all spread the philosophy to trust one another, talk with one another, share with one another. We have a nonthreatening culture (setting and school mission) here because we help each other like that. We do more for each other than the district.

P10 stated,

The district requires PLCs (Professional Learning Communities). At first, I assumed they'd be a waste of time, but it's holding me accountable (to reach out for support and not isolate when frustrated). I'm not a fan of accountability (laugh) PLCs work if everybody's sold on the collaborative aspect of it. My team is (pause) which I'm glad for because it isn't that way from year to year.

Collaborating with colleagues supports participants to prepare effective lessons. P3 stated,

For math I collaborate with other teachers. Sometimes I don't know if I'm best meeting their needs. So, I get flustered when they (students) keep making the same mistakes and I'm teaching (pause) things differently over and over. I might as well see what everybody else is doing (pause) get some support from my peers (other teachers). I worry about if my students pass (graduate).

P6 stated, “I work with my colleagues. When we collaborate, student work improves.” P8 stated, “I rely (effectiveness of lesson) heavily on the veteran teachers.”

Collaborating with colleagues supports participants to meet students’ needs. P2 stated,

> My fellow teachers here want the same thing for our students (pause), success after they graduate, so what we do is talk things over because we have everybody else’s students. I see “Johnny” in the morning and somebody else sees him in the afternoon. We collaborate about what is best for him (Johnny) while all his problems are around.
>
> P4 stated,
>
> When I was hired they asked me if I worked a lot with other teachers. I said yeah, of course because it works to support student needs (pause), but you always have somebody not wanting to move forward (pause). That usually changes.

Emergent Subtheme 1(a): Collaborating Weekly with Colleagues is Ideal

The participants commented that making weekly collaboration a priority is a vital component for achieving student success. P7 cited, “This is a smaller district (pause), smaller compared to like (another district name), so collaborating once a week with everybody is a big deal to meet the special needs of these kids.” Additionally, the participants’ responses to this question indicated a sense of perceived value in setting aside weekly time to meet with their colleagues to collaborate and discuss what is best for their students. P9 stated, “meeting weekly with other teachers helps manage the little details (how to meet student needs). Sometimes the obvious gaps in knowledge are in

them (the little details).” However, though participants noted that setting aside time every week to meet with their colleagues is ideal, participants noted it was difficult due to scheduling: P11: “We schedule time to meet first, otherwise it won’t happen. Things just inevitably come up.”

This subtheme answered both research questions. My initial thoughts were that special educators from different generations held hesitant philosophies about collaboration such as (a) older generations would be less prone to collaborate, instead choose to work in isolation; (b) older generations were set in their teaching methods and less prone to try new things. Interestingly, most participants admitted that their determination to stay connected with their colleagues helped them to solve student challenges. For example, P1 claimed, “I use my colleagues as a collaborative sounding board for challenging behaviors and slow progress. There are times student progress is really slow and my colleagues put my work in perspective. They give me new angles to look at something, especially when a student is struggling with substance abuse.”

A discrepancy found included that many of the participants commented how most of their instructional methods and preparation to collaborate were acquired on the job. For example, P8 commented, “We are like a team here and bring data (what is working for students and what is not) to the table during weekly meetings. You become vulnerable (don’t know what to do or how to teach material), but lots of great ideas are bounced around.”

Emergent Subtheme 1(b): Coteach as Much as Possible

Another emergent subtheme included how participants considered coteaching ideal for collaboration, ultimately, leading to student success. Participants stated that coteaching efforts were “hit and miss.” For example, P11 stated, “Many of the teacher’s here have multiple certifications, which makes team teaching a real advantage for students to meet their goals, but, yea it can be hit and miss.” This subtheme answered both research questions. Participants stressed the importance of coteaching, predominantly called “team teaching” within the interviews. Participants noted that coteaching helped to guide them when they were faced with students who (a) refused to try; (b) struggled with mental illness; (c) were incarcerated or homeless. Participants also expressed how coteaching provided extended opportunities to (a) practice effective EBPs; (b) work individually with students and (c) debrief. The following quotes below from the teachers’ support the above statements: The emergence of this theme was unsurprising, as experience has taught me that coteaching helps tremendously with student success.

Coteaching helps participants to work with students who refuse to try. P9 stated, “Team teaching is necessary for me because there are times I’ve run out of options with a student (who refused to put forth effort) and somebody else needs to step in.”

Coteaching helps participants to work individually with students. P3 stated, “I enjoy team teaching because it gives me time to make sure students are understanding the material. I walk around the room helping students while the other teacher is teaching.”

Coteaching helps participants to debrief. P12 stated, "Meeting weekly with my colleagues gives me time to debrief. This job isn't easy. There are challenges and it helps to talk about them. It helps students too, not directly, but I'd say indirectly."

Emergent Theme 2: Make a Connection with Students

Making a personal connection with students to support academic success was another significant theme that emerged from participant interviews. This theme answered both research questions relating to (a) the perceptions of special educators teaching in alternative high school settings concerning their classroom instructional preparation to effectively educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure; (b) how special educators teaching in alternative high school settings perceive their preparation to proficiently practice EBPs in the classroom to educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure. The participants noted that building a positive and trusting relationship with their students helped them to (a) be better educators; (b) prepare optimum lessons; (c) more readily meet students' needs. This theme confirmed research demonstrating that when a teacher makes a personal connection to his or her students, student success increases because an innate psychological requirement is met (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Hamre et al., 2013). The following quotes from the participants'' responses support the above statements. Nonetheless, in my opinion, a teacher who does not make a connection to his or her students will not be as successful as a teacher who does make a connection.

Making student connections helps participants to be better educators. P6 stated,

> IEPs don't tell me much. I watch and listen to the kids. Each kid reacts to people differently and if you don't treat them (pause) when you first meet them and greet them and treat them as if nothing is wrong with them they most of the time respond to you (to best teach them) and want a connection with you because they feel that you care for them.

Making student connections helps participants to prepare optimum lessons. P12 stated,

> I make a huge effort to get to know my kids the first week of school, so I can tell when something's wrong. The first week I do two projects, so I can learn what they are about (how to teach him or her individually) and this helps me teach them and relate to their lives.

P12 stated,

> Getting them to realize they can do it. A lot of our kids are used to getting D/F's and then they come here and get A/B's and I ask them what made the difference, they say it's because you guys care for us and expect us to do good stuff.

Making student connections helps participants to meet students' needs. P1 stated, "Ultimately, if your students don't trust you or feel some kind of a connection to you, they won't want to come to class. Sometimes half the battle for these students can be getting them to trust you." P7 stated, "I learned very early on in my teaching career working with at-risk kids that to do what is best for them you have to connect yourself to them. I was one of these kids, so I get their lives."

Emergent Subtheme 2(a): While Connecting to Students Target Their Self-Esteem

As presented in earlier chapters, studies show that in the alternative classroom setting, one area of competency (socioemotional) directly influences the other (instructional learning) (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014; Hoshide, 2013). Participants directly or indirectly expressed the importance of this statement by admitting that they used self-esteem building strategies (socioemotional competencies) in the classroom to achieve student success. For example, P4 commented, “Some of my students assume they won’t graduate because their parents didn’t. It’s like faulty wiring or something with their self-worth. Building their self-esteem is in the little things. Their password into their computer is I-can-pass. I figure if they type it a thousand times it’ll sink in.” Subtheme 2(a) answered both research questions. Participants also mentioned that they do not use punishments, competitiveness, demands, and evaluative pressures to control student behavior or to achieve student success. According to P11, “My classroom isn’t competitive, or at least I don’t believe it is because my students work at their own pace. I’ve been doing this along time and I’ve never pushed competition.”

The mentioned underlying facets of subtheme 2(a) confirmed research illustrating that punishments, competitiveness, demands, and evaluative pressures to control student behavior or to achieve student success, undermines it (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2015). Moreover, participants noted how they incorporate self-confidence building aspects of learning in their instruction to (a) help students succeed; (b) connect to students. Additionally, the use of art therapy was mentioned as an instructional means of boosting students’ self-confidence (a) P11, “Art has been immensely helpful in

dealing with self-esteem issues." (b) P12 commented, "Probably what's most helpful for me to get these kids to open up about themselves is using art."

Examples of unidentifiable and permission-granted student artwork exists in Appendix C. Furthermore, emergent theme 2, subtheme 2(a) and subtheme 2(b) confirmed research that connecting and relating to students at risk of school failure involves building a sense of trust in the teacher student relationship (Deci & Ryan, 2000). With regards to emergent theme 2, subtheme 2(a) and subtheme 2(b), both personally continue to be main components of my teaching philosophy, as well as every day aspects of my work in the classroom. Both themes are needed to achieve student success. The following quotes listed below support the participants responses mentioned above:

Self-esteem strategies help participants to achieve student success. P1 stated, "Self-esteem is a key competent to this job. You have to know how to get the kids to buy into their worth and that they can graduate." P9 stated, "I rely on the power of the refrigerator door. I post students' good work and it builds their confidence."

Self-esteem building helps participants connect to students. P2 stated,

> I myself was a teen mom, which helps me relate to what many of them are going through. I make it a point to stress to them that having a baby young is hard (sigh) but it isn't the end all, at least for me it wasn't. What I mean is I connect to them because I felt at one time that this was it? This was my cards.

P3 stated, "You have to have a rapport with these kids to build their trust (pause) understand where they're at." P4 stated, "these kids need a connecting point to you (the

teacher) and if it (the relationship) isn't there, they'll leave. I'm serious about this because I've seen it happen over and over."

Emergent Subtheme 2(b): While Connecting to Students Promote Independence

Emergent Subtheme 2(b): While Connecting to Students Promote Independence answered both research questions and was considered (a) a perceived significant instructional preparatory component to effectively educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure; (b) a perceived preparation method to proficiently practice EBPs in the classroom to educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure. Many of the participants expressed that transitioning efforts are a priority to graduate students who can be successful in the workforce. P8 expressed, "We push transitioning for these kids. They need to know what opportunities are available for them after graduation to lead a life of success and good choices."

Furthermore, participants noted that their job as teachers is not only about connecting to their students to build self-confidence, but self-sufficiency too. For example, P12 stated, "I encourage my students to take command over their own leaning and to learn to be independent and not rely too much on others. I mean I tell them to ask for help, but that it really comes down to them being in charge of their lives." Participants revealed how transitioning to an independent life is an important aspect of the district's curriculum, which includes the support of many community resources. Several transitioning community resources were mentioned by P3: "Lots of businesses in our community provide scholarships and there are free mental health agencies that provide

free screenings and counseling for these kids. The juvenile detention center even offers AA meetings and there are clinics for girls to go to if they believe they are pregnant or have a SDT, so yea, there are options." I believe that it takes a community to academically and socially raise a child, therefore, community resources and support are vital to student success for all students, especially those at risk of school failure.

Emergent Theme 3: Create a Healthy School Climate

Another emergent theme included that participants believed student and instructional success begins with creating a healthy school climate. P5 mentioned, "The atmosphere here is real, yet not inflexible. I think they learn to be responsible here." This theme relates to and answers both research questions. Participants noted how a poorly planned and run school environment can be a detriment to student success. P2 stated, "cluttered classrooms are distracting and too sterile of a classroom can also make students uneasy and unwilling to try. This school is, I'd say a good setting because we're real here. Similarly, participants expressed how students need to be disciplined according to their circumstances. P7 stated, "Each student requires a different plan of action to learn. It isn't the same for every student A participant commented, "Sometimes rigid rules, like something in an institution with bars only make things worse for these kids." Moreover, emergent theme 3 demonstrated no data discrepancies, but confirmed research presented in Chapter 2. The research in Chapter 2 stated that creating a safe, supportive and interactive academic environment is considered an effective method for improving student success (Thapa et al., 2013). This theme is confirmed in several studies specifying how a positive academic setting (a) develops emotional connections in

student-teacher and student-school relationships; (b) influences a student's academic and social development (Cornell, Shukla, & Konold, 2016; Shukla, Konold, & Cornell, 2016); (c) creates more desirable psychological and behavioral outcomes for students (Bradshaw, Milam, Furr-Holden, & Lindstrom Johnson, 2015; McCormick, Cappella, O'Connor, & McClowry, 2015).

Additionally, P11 commented on how a healthy climate develops emotional connections in student teacher and student school relationships: "There's a more comfortable and intimate atmosphere in the classrooms here. The rapport between the teachers and students is strong. Our classes are longer. We have 90 minutes with the kids. Some of the kids we have twice." P7 mentioned how a healthy climate influences a student's academic and social development: "The principal here understands that each student requires a different plan of action to learn. It isn't the same for every student. I wasn't really taught classroom management, which I guess includes how the school climate feels from day to day. After so many years in the classroom you sort of learn how to run a smooth show. My big thing is creating a place . . . yeah, a climate where my students want to ask for help, if they need it." P6 explained how a healthy climate creates more desirable psychological and behavioral outcomes for students: "Here (the school) they (students) don't feel defeated because they have more opportunities." Appendix C illustrates a participant response with visual representation of an effective method used to create a healthy school climate. Regardless of a student's home or school setting, I believe specific aspects must be in place for a student to flourish. A healthy environment with consistency, structure and concern is one of them.

Emergent Theme 4: Set High Expectations

Another emergent theme included that participants believed in setting high expectations for their students. For example, P3 stated, “You never help a kid by lowering the bar, you always raise it.” Additionally, P10 commented, “There’s a lot of blame (victim mentality). They (students) think they are powerless. When we set high expectations, they learn some responsibility and grow, not just in academics, but as people.” This theme is confirmed by several ethnographic studies documenting that when students are given high expectations, graduation rates increase (Jia, Konold, & Cornell, 2016; Oreopoulos, Brown, & Lavecchia, 2017). This theme answered both research questions. According to P1, setting high expectations for their students was not a component of instruction that was taught in their preparatory courses; rather, it was self-imposed to achieve student success and instill self-confidence: P6 mentioned that their school district is data driven and when teachers felt like school administrators were demanding specific metrics from students, effective classroom practices were not implemented: P2 stated that demanding specific test scores did more harm to student success. Additionally, emergent theme 4 demonstrated no data discrepancies, however, confirmed current research illustrating the pertinence of expecting students to excel with high marks in the classroom (Messacar & Oreopoulos, 2013). As explained by the participants, setting high expectations for students was not learned in coursework, rather an intuition. P2 commented, “What teacher doesn’t want their student to do well. If this isn’t the case, you’re in the wrong profession.” Personally, I believe students will rise to

the level of success they are expected to rise, regardless of traditional or alternative school setting.

Emergent Theme 5: Focus on Language Development Challenges

Another theme that emerged in the interviews was participants perceived language development as an imperative aspect of student success. Language development challenges mentioned included (a) written expression; (b) spelling; (c) sentence structure; (d) words with multiple meanings; (e) inadequate language practice at home for bilingual students; (f) reading comprehension; (g) vocabulary; (h) English rules; (i) phonetics. According to P1, *"*Written expression is a definite challenge. I'm not talking about writing a novel (pause), I mean a basic ability to express oneself. Minority students struggle with (long pause) I'd say phonics (long pause). Like cute being cut (long pause). The e at the end, or words like moose and goose. Say, if goose is geese, then why isn't moose, meese (laugh). Yea, those aspects are hard for some of my students. And not writing sentences because of not being able to structure words, (pause) yea, so written expression preparation, I'd say." Additionally, P7 commented, "you want to give them the gift of bilingualism, but when students don't practice English, it's hard to teach pretty much anything. Really, inadequate practice at home is concerning; it's really hard if they don't practice it (English). I havta hit words with multiple meanings hard, like, say run. That's a toughie. The cat runs, or he runs a machine (pause) the car runs, the car's running (pause) you see how it gets difficult? I rely on flashcards with this issue." P9 expressed, "they (students) leave class and what I taught them about using English instead of Spanish is usually left here. When they're at home, they just speak Spanish,

and they fail to practice what I'm teaching them in English. It's frustrating." This theme answered both research questions. Personally, I feel language development challenges require immediate attention, specifically in the primary grades because the first few years (K- grade 2) a student is learning to read, thereafter (Grade 3-12) a student is reading to learn. Experience has taught me that if a student still struggles to read by the time he or she reaches high school, learning to do so fluently is an intense and challenging uphill climb.

Emergent Theme 6: Structure is Necessary for Student Success

The participants noted that their students require structure and consistency to be successful in the classroom. For example, P10 commented, "They (students) show me what they can't do, and then I show them how we can learn to do it (successfully) (pause), and the first thing I do is give their day structure." This emergent theme relates to and answers both research questions pertaining to (a) the perceptions of special educators teaching in alternative high school settings concerning their classroom instructional preparation to effectively educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure; (b) how special educators perceive their preparation to proficiently practice EBPs in the classroom to educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure. This identified theme confirms research expressing that students at risk of school failure require orderly instruction, with high standards and clear expectations, as well as lessons that are delivered with warmth, connection, and structure (Furrer, Skinner, & Pitzer, 2014). P1 mentioned, "There is a lot of drama here and these kids need flow (pause), lots of structure. For sure, they don't get

it (structure) at home." P7 cited, "for starters, I structure my room (pause), their day." According to P8, "You definitely have to get creative (strategies used) with how you are going to be consistent and structure their week. Some may only show up half of it." Another participant response includes the following: P9: "We structure their schedule to fit their life, and we give it (their circumstances) love, respect, and options. There have been years my student attendance is pretty poor. When I have them, I teach them what they need (pause), well, I don't waste their time you could say (pause), I keep things moving and structured for them." Discrepancies within this theme were nonexistent. Appendix D offers an image of structure as referred to by P4: "Everything about this place is structured. It's actually a requirement for students excelling. I structure my seating and each day is day really structured for the kids in the way I implement my lessons and studies. My students literally know how they will account for each minute of the day because I post everything on the way in folders." I believe this emergent theme directly and indirectly influences how special educators educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure. Indirectly: the way a lesson is structured is imperative for struggling students. Directly: the structure of the setting the lesson is taught within, is just as important. I believe both factors can be a challenge to implement within the alternative setting.

Emergent Theme 7: Avoid Unrelated Work as Students Sense its Irrelevancy

Another emergent theme included that participants avoided giving students meaningless work because students sense its irrelevancy. For example, P11 stated, “I don’t weigh them (students) down with meaningless work (requirements not essential for graduation). What’s the point? They won’t do it.” Participants admitted to carefully thinking lesson plans through, and not wasting classroom time. According to P9: “There have been years my student attendance is pretty poor. When I have them, I teach them what they need (pause), well, I don’t waste their time you could say (pause), I keep things moving and structured for them.” This theme relates to and answers the research questions pertaining to (a) the perceptions of special educators teaching in alternative high school settings concerning their classroom instructional preparation to effectively educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure; (b) how special educators perceive their preparation to proficiently practice EBPs in the classroom to educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure. When mentioning classwork, participants stated that to encourage their students and build their confidence, they (a) regularly make students aware of their success within relevant assignments; (b) support students in staying on track with graduation or recovery credits. Personally, I found the emergence of theme 7 by participants a refreshing surprise in the data collection. In my college preparatory coursework, I experienced irrelevant work that I found not only cumbersome but a waste of my time. The following quotes support the participant statements mentioned above:

Participants make students aware of successes using relevant assignments. P10 stated, "When I give students' work and feedback, it is always to help them improve future performance. I try my best to keep feedback constructive and clear, and about something students can work on while doing their next assignment."

Participants support students to graduate using relevant work. P2 stated,

> The district doesn't have a set homework policy, and I can't say I have formal training in giving homework, but none of that really matters because the students don't do homework, they see no purpose in it. I simply stick to class goals and unit objectives (towards graduation credits).

P4 stated,

> Most of these kids have been in and out of foster care and are dealing with heavy substance abuse. And doing well in school is the last thing on their minds, so I stick to what I need to (for graduation credits) and never give them busy work.

Emergent Theme 8: Work Towards Transitions Using Community Resources

Another emergent theme from participant interviews was student support in transitioning to the workforce after graduation using community resources. P4 commented, "When one of my kids is arrested and is required to do community service, I keep in contact with the student's probation officer to align his or her community service to school goals. The businesses are always receptive about working with our kids." This theme answered both research questions relating to (a) the perceptions of special educators teaching in alternative high school settings concerning their classroom instructional preparation to effectively educate and advance the success of SEN students

who are at risk of school failure; (b) how special educators teaching in alternative high school settings perceive their preparation to proficiently practice EBPs in the classroom to educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure. The participants noted that working with the community helped with the school's graduation rate. According to P1, "It seems like when the schools and community as a whole are all wanting to see these kids succeed, good things happen (students graduate)." Community mental health resources were also mentioned by participants as a valuable service. P2 mentioned, "I depend a lot on my experiences and talk to my kids to find out what they need. This school district only has one social worker, which really isn't a resource. I usually have to go out into the community for mental health issues . . ." From personal experience, working with students who struggle academically, most face momentous individual barriers preventing them from experiencing school success, including single-parent homes, mental issues and addiction. Due to such matters, helping students work towards successfully transitioning in to the workforce using community resources is essential for student success.

Emergent Theme 9: Use Individualized Instruction

Another theme that emerged among the participants was the use of individualized instruction. According to P12, "My perspective on special education is much different. You could say I'm old school (apply individuality to work like was done in old one room country schools). I use phonics and mnemonic devices, even peppermint because sucking on hard candy seems to help some kids concentrate." P2 cited, "I asked the student what do you do at home. He said, 'I get my ear plugs and watch tv. My mom

doesn't really talk to me cuz she works a lot.' So, you see, I deal with each kid differently when it comes to their school needs and needs as a person." This theme confirms research within peer reviewed studies that an educator's knowledge base, methods preparation, and education are essential precursors to tailored student success, regardless of setting (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015; Gagnon et al., 2012). This theme answered both research questions relating to (a) the perceptions of special educators teaching in alternative high school settings concerning their classroom instructional preparation to effectively educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure; (b) how special educators teaching in alternative high school settings perceive their preparation to proficiently practice EBPs in the classroom to educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure. Additionally, participants stated that they use individualized instruction to challenge their students: P4 specified, "A lot of these kids have been programmed to think they can't do a lot of things. Their brains have never been challenged. The unprogramming (that challenging work can be done) can be hard, but is a very individualized thing." Participants also noted how they use individual instruction to help students to be successful amid dealing with substance abuse and intense emotional baggage: For example, P6 commented: "It's not always about academics at first. Some of these kids need so much more individual attention and emotional work before learning can occur." In my opinion, the use of individualized instruction is vital for students at risk of school failure. When instruction is individualized and made personal for students, it gives them a sense of ownership over individual adversity. Individuality

in coursework allows students who are dealing with intense emotional struggles to work at their own pace. P12 commented, “First, you (the teacher) have to sort through the individual baggage (emotional issues and adversity at home) before any work can be done and individually it can take a while.”

Emergent Subtheme 9(a): Consider the Influence of a Student’s Background

Another theme from participants’ interviews was to consider the influence of a student’s background on their success in the classroom, specifically the influences of trauma, PTSD, mental illness, and addiction. According to P1, “I can get a lot further with my students (teaching them) if I know where they come from (what is in their emotional and academic past). Every one of them are here for a reason.” Additionally, P7 mentioned, “Substance abuse is a big issue and its more out of control than people realize. It’s not like these kids just crawl out of somewhere, but we have some amazing kids, but we compete with these drugs. This is the invisible bag of crap (past filled with trauma, PTSD, mental illness, and addiction) our kids walk in with each day, but you have to in a very individual way . . .” Also, P9 cited, “What we’re seeing (why students are not successful graduating) is a significant shift in mental health issues. I think 90% of it is PTSD. You have to understand what you are dealing with (what’s in the student’s past and present life) here at this level.”

Furthermore, participants stated they felt unprepared to address many of the emotional issues their students bring to the classroom that impede learning and hinder the advancement of proficiency levels. According to P3, “I don’t think most teachers (participant included) are prepared to work with this population. No textbooks aren’t

what help you reach and teach these kids." Additionally, participants responded that working with students at risk of school failure is largely about trusting your intuition, which is not taught in preparatory coursework. For example, P6 stated, "When push comes to shove I trust my gut on what's best for a student (to meet academic needs). It's never let me down. I never know what will push a kid over the edge. Knowing their background and what could and how things affect them is helpful." In my opinion, the use of intuition in the alternative classroom is a vital skill. One participant noted that being aware of what pushes a student over the edge is important. I agree.

Emergent Theme 10: Use Technology

Another theme that emerged with the participants was to use technology in the alternative school classroom as technology permits students to use different learning styles to succeed. P3 commented, "you (participant referring to researcher) know kids absorb things differently and most of the time these kids are audio and visual learners, so the computers are great (necessary)." The participants expressed that in using technology to explore and create, their students have a better chance of achieving student success. For instance, P8 stated, "I use several computer programs to monitor my students' learning. I'm visually constantly checking if they are getting a concept." This theme answered both research questions relating to (a) the perceptions of special educators teaching in alternative high school settings concerning their classroom instructional preparation to effectively educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure; (b) how special educators teaching in alternative high school settings perceive their preparation to proficiently practice EBPs in the classroom to

educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure. This theme confirms research from scholarly studies that educators and policymakers realize that the use of technology to close the achievement gap and improve student learning is a worthwhile pursuit, especially for students at-risk of school failure (Darling-Hammond, Zielezinski & Goldman, 2014). Participants noted the importance of using technology in many forms to engage students including (a) YouTube videos; (b) hyperlinks; (c) the Web and free online programs. According to P5, "Social media is the new peer pressure and you gotta know what's out there." P11 cited, "I use Edutopia online; it's a big site on innovation and videos." In my opinion, technology in the classroom is essential, regardless of setting. Students require preparation to work on applicable software that will be a part of their lives in the workforce.

Emergent Subtheme 10(a): Use Technology to Engage Students

Another subtheme that emerged with participants included the use of technology to engage students. According to P9, "Technology keeps the kids' attention longer and them engaged in the work." P2 revealed, "I try to use multimedia to get my ideas across about the material they are studying by using websites, PowerPoint presentations and other means." P5, "I use technology to give the kids 21st-century learning skills (relevant skills that will engage them to the workforce" The participants were comfortable with using technology in their lesson planning, but expressed that they did not have adequate technology or preparation to use it as much as they would prefer to allow their students to engage in effective learning activities. P3 mentioned, "I use what I have in this classroom the best I can for these kids. It's not top-of the-

line, software but I'm familiar with what I use." This theme answers the research questions and relates to (a) the perceptions of special educators teaching in alternative high school settings concerning their classroom instructional preparation to effectively educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure; (b) how special educators perceive their preparation to proficiently practice EBPs in the classroom to educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure. Personally, the use of multimedia in the classroom is an essential part of my curriculum and was refreshing to hear that participants used it as well. I agree with P5s statement about students requiring 21st-century learning skills that will engage them to the workforce.

Summary

This chapter presented an overview of the study, description of the interview setting, participant demographics and details of the participant interviews. The details of the interviews included key themes and subthemes that emerged from those interviews. Additionally, the participants' responses demonstrated how they attempt to achieve student success in their district within an alternative school setting. From the participants' interviews, I found that special educators have similar priorities, concerns and use comparable teaching methods to achieve student success. This chapter included a detailed analysis of the participant interviews, as well as the evidence of trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, confirmability, dependability. The analysis of the themes and subthemes that emerged from those interviews was also outlined. The interviews conducted during this study produced several outcomes. Participants

conveyed differences in their perceived preparedness based on years of teaching experience, quality of resources and knowledge of socioemotional EBPs. However, the study's outcomes discovered no variances in preparedness based on certification route. Participants responded that psychological problems commonly impeded student success. The results also indicated that a structured classroom influenced the practices teachers implemented, but grade level, instructional design, and perceived preparedness did not. Participants reported that they use formative assessment to (a) determine effective EBPs practices to use with students; (b) to help students recognize assets and areas requiring attention and (c) improve teaching methods.

Furthermore, a correlation analysis discovered positive links among those participants who perceived they were prepared and the methods they implement in their classrooms. Additionally, participants mentioned that when they felt confident about their approaches to address the mental health needs of students, student success increased. In addition, within the interviews, participants identified several strategies that were effective for student success rates including (a) consistent collaboration; (b) boosting student self-worth; (c) knowledge of student's school history and background. However, the data displayed that some teachers do not consistently collaborate with other educators or gain the trust of their students, despite best efforts. While participants often stated that they had community support, they also stated that they needed more resources and preparation based on mental health issues such as trauma and PTSD. Participants mentioned they desired additional time to network with other special education teachers in the district about socioemotional issues. In conclusion, the upcoming Chapter 5

includes the key findings, interpretation of the key findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for further research, social change implications, application to professional practice, my reflections, and concluding remarks about the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to identify the perceptions of special educators, as guided by SDT, concerning their preparation to effectively educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure. Most special education teachers entering the profession are not prepared by teacher education programs to handle the academic and social-emotional related problems of their student population due to decreasing certification standards and insufficient knowledge and skills, such as applying self-determination to educational practice. The perceptions of special educators, as guided by aspects of SDT, teaching in alternative high school settings concerning their preparation to educate SEN students who are at risk of school failure are unknown. Ultimately, the insufficient knowledge and skills in U.S. teacher education programs are problematic to the success of SEN students.

I collected data from 12 special education teachers working within an alternative school setting. Table 4 below shows the themes and the occurrence frequency of those themes answering the study's research questions based on the responses from the study's participants.

Table 4

Frequency of Themes for Achieving Student Success

Themes	Reference	Frequency %
Make a connect with students	12/12	100%
Colleague collaboration	12/12	100%
Create a healthy school climate	11/12	92%
Set high expectations	11/12	92%
Focus on language challenges	10/12	83%
Implement structure	10/12	83%
Avoid irrelevant work	9/12	75%
Use community resources	9/12	75%
Use individualized instruction	10/12	83%
Use technology	9/12	75%

Interpretation of the Findings

The study's conclusions consist of the following interpretations: knowing how to effectively collaborate is a part of a special educator's job and is perceived as a key factor in effective instruction for SEN students at risk of school failure. This key finding supports research on the topic as outlined in Chapter 2 including (a) when teachers feel confident in their capabilities and knowledge to collaborate and coteach, students reap the benefits of higher levels of success (Chetty et al., 2014; DeMonte, 2015). Additionally, the responsibility of teaching students at risk of school failure requires a sophisticated level of collaboration that exceeds what is typically taught in preparatory programs (Shin et al., 2016). Given the complex schedules and time demands of most special education teachers, it is difficult for teachers to have a dedicated period for collaboration. Furthermore, ensuring the successful implementation of the appropriate modifications for

each student can be challenging, making collaboration between professionals of significance (Moolenaar et al., 2012). However, contrary to findings from Porowski et al. (2014) and Sass and Feng (2012), I found that licensure path did not make a difference when handling the academic and socioemotional related problems of students at risk of school failure. Additionally, the gap of inadequacy and vague research, mentioned in Chapter 2, regarding alternative education program practices, definitions, and instructional standards special education teachers are expected to use did not hamper the participants of the study. Instead, participants expressed a reliance on collaboration and coteaching to meet student needs. One participant mentioned, "I rely heavily on the veteran teachers."

Another significant finding from the results of this study relates to special educators' challenges in and practices for making a connection to students to develop self-esteem to increase student success. The SDT underscored that students' belief in their ability to achieve is monumental for school success. ACEs influence students' socioemotional and cognitive development and their ability to learn (Florian, 2013). ACEs are psychologically detrimental and are frequently an antecedent to SEN students entering the alternative high school setting (Dupéré et al., 2015; Gable et al., 2012; Zelechoski, 2013). Participants also stated that many of the students who enter the school site struggle with trauma from ACEs causing a difficulty to with socially connecting with peers and developing close relationships. Participants commented that with additional training in this area, they could better support traumatized students to achieve success in the classroom. Knowledge of a student who has experienced trauma could improve how

special educators educate, engage, and motivate SEN students at risk of school failure (Brunzell, Stokes & Waters, 2016).

Although there were few discrepancies within the results, the findings did extend knowledge in the discipline. For example, the participants stressed that opportunities to satisfy a student's need for independence, connection, and competence allowed his or her self-motivation and overall psychological state to improve. Such an improvement translates into better classroom performance. Researchers have demonstrated the significance of the fulfillment of these basic needs. I failed to confirm this statement, as a participant mentioned that some students are "significantly bruised and will more than likely never overcome some of their emotional challenges." This participant response aligned with Gable et al. (2012), who emphasized that students with extreme academic and socio-emotional needs are "among the least successful of all and rarely evidence significant educational progress" (p. 499).

SDT was chosen to frame this study because of its emphasis on using specific and strategic instructional methods to vitalize the student's inner psychological (mental/emotional) motivation. According to SDT, the integration of effective EBPs and helpful resources is crucial to support student engagement in learning that satisfies a student's psychological needs (Reeve, 2012, State of Connecticut, 2014; Wood, 2015). I found that participants used technology, community resources, structure, artwork, and high expectations to engage students and support student success. However, participants stated that the use of engagement strategies were predominantly not taught to them in

college coursework; rather, it was learned through colleague collaboration and trial and error after years of teaching experience.

The participants identified a lack of preparation for dealing with student trauma, PTSD, and addiction issues that commonly impede student learning. Participants also mentioned that when student motivation and mental health improved, school engagement saw a significant turnaround in determination, ultimately influencing the postgraduation employment prospects and mental health of students. Research also confirmed this result (Heller et al., 2013). However, the perceptions of the participants were that it was their love and concern for students, as well as an open willingness to show care, that made the biggest difference, not textbook knowledge from college coursework. I stopped reviewing here.

The classroom conditions used by participants for students' success, many of which align with SDT, have the possibility to create the engagement and motivation necessary for student success (Haydon et al., 2012). As discussed in Chapter 2, research from Shah, Alam and Baig (2012) illustrated that if special education teachers use classroom techniques grounded in SDT, such as relevant classwork, structure and strength emphasis and self-fulfillment activities, student success is possible. Additionally, a significant finding from the results of this study relates to special educators' challenges in and practices for developing focused strategies to overcome language challenges. Participants reported that they are less prepared to meet the language needs of their students, but relied on technology and colleague collaboration to do so. Participants explained that the complication of language challenges including written expression,

phonics, and English rules such as irregular verbs, are difficult for their students to grasp and therefore difficult for them to teach. Adding to such challenges, participants discussed not having up-to-date computers and technology. A participant stressed, “When it comes to computer software, we’re behind the times.” In addition to technology, participants reported that attendance, specifically getting students to class every day of the week, is another challenge. However, participants stressed the use of creative strategies to increase attendance rates. Appendix C displays visual representation of a participant response regarding creativity:

> Attendance issues are big here. I think it always comes back to attendance issues. At least if we can get them here regularly, then we can work with them. We can help them identify what their struggles are personally and academically. We’ve been working on that and have gotten off (pause), well, a much better start than years past. We actually make them clock in so they can see if this was their job and they didn’t come they’d be fired.

Remarkably, based on the results of the interviews and an interpretation of the findings in the context of the conceptual framework used for the study, participants repeatedly revisited the central theme based on another theory, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Though participants responses in this study confirm findings from SDT, established by Deci and Ryan (1985), after reading and rereading the results, the application of Maslow’s hierarchy theory seemed equal, if not more fitting. Participants expressed that their students were motivated to achieve after certain needs were met, and survival needs always took direct precedence over student success. Regardless of the

learning strategy used, if a student's most basic need for physical survival was in jeopardy, student success suffered. Figure 5 below illustrates Maslow's hierarchy theory.

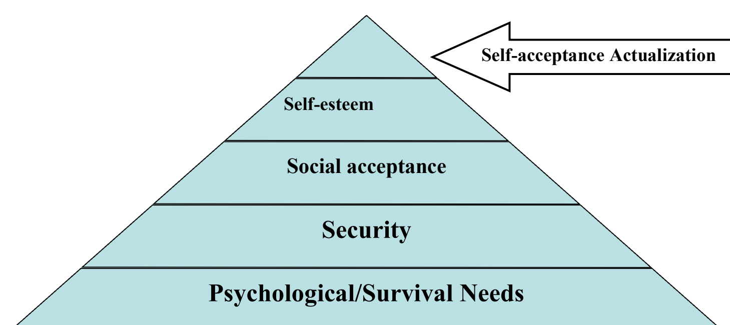

Figure 5. Maslow's hierarchy theory vs. self-determination theory (SDT).

Based on the interview responses, teachers are attempting to meet their student's academic and mental health needs. The practices discussed in the interviews demonstrated an understanding of, as well as an effort to achieve student success by meeting basic psychological and physical needs. However, beyond this concept of meeting mental health needs, teachers employed other practices for specifically addressing academic language challenges, which included coteaching and weekly collaboration through PLCs (Professional Learning Communities). As described in Chapter 2, teachers who possessed strong collaborative skills reported success in coteaching and student success (Shady et al., 2013). Table 5 below shows the most common subthemes for effective strategies used by the participants of this study for student success.

Table 5

Frequency of Subthemes for Achieving Student Success

Subthemes	Reference	Frequency %
Weekly collaboration is ideal	8/12	67%
Coteach as much as possible	9/12	75%
Consider a student's background	11/12	92%
Use technology to engage students	9/12	75%

Limitations of the Study

Limitations are potential weaknesses that could affect the outcome of research and are outside of the control of the researcher (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994).) In this qualitative study, the limitations were my role as the researcher, the sample size, and the geographic location. Regarding the limitation for sample size, the data was collected from a small sample size. Another limitation concerned the trustworthiness and that it relied on the honesty and truthfulness of the participants. As a researcher, who invested ample time and integrity with each participant, I believe that the participants were honest in their responses. However, there remains the possibility that at least one of the participants was less than 100% truthful. Moreover, as I consider the research topic and my selection of the participants, I ponder if the outcomes would have varied with a different group of participants. These participants were all special education teachers from one school district in New Mexico. A sample size from a different geographic location or special educators from a larger school district may have produced different conclusions. These limitations in the

sampling process potentially ran the risk of not generalizing to the greater population (Patton, 2002).

Recommendations for Further Research

The results of this study showed there are many similarities in the perceptions of special educators, concerning their preparation to effectively educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure. The results also showed there are similarities in the way special educators perceive their preparation to proficiently practice EBPs in the classroom to educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure. Further research could include seeking the perceptions of general educators who work in the district and compare and contrast outcomes. Additionally, I recommend selecting a sample group of more participants in different regions of the United States, which might expose variances in both instructional strategies and preparation for the teaching profession. Moreover, the study's outcomes propose several inquiries meriting further examination.

1. What core reasons determine the placement of SEN students who are at risk of school failure in the alternative school setting?
2. Which subjects are covered in special education teacher preparatory coursework and which have shown to be of the greatest value?
3. How are special education teachers specifically addressing the mental health needs of SEN students who are at risk of school failure?

Additional studies might focus on recognizing what factors cause placement in the alternative school setting. Examining this area of study would place preparation to

intervene at the forefront of teacher groundwork. Additionally, inquiring about the number of coursework credits needed by pre-service special educators to help prepare them for the "rude reality of [alternative] school classrooms" (Farrell, 2012, p. 437). Discovering what content is covered in the coursework is equally pertinent.

The study's methodology was self-administering and had limitations on participants' responses. Hence, a possible subsequent phase could be focus groups with special education teachers, as well as classroom observations. Repeated observations and focus groups provide an opportunity to confirm how EBPs are implemented and how content is made accessible to SEN students who are at risk of school failure. In combination with observing in the classroom, school administrators could be interviewed, which could provide feedback about the support being given to new special educators entering the district's alternative schools and if they are prepared to handle the SEN student population.

Another future range of study could encompass educational institutions, as schools depend on colleges to teach student teachers for the diversity of 21st-century schoolrooms. Education colleges need to be held accountable for their certification methods and how they prepare student special educators. Though colleges provide courses addressing student trauma, the classes are commonly elective. Consequently, examining special educator preparatory program requirements, as well as alternate program routes could provide data regarding the degree and depth such preparation requirements entail. The level of preparation and experience university professors have

concerning EBPs and instructional techniques to instruct preservice special educators, is also of study significance.

Implications

The purpose of this phenological study was to (a) to identify the perceptions of special educators, as guided by Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory and focused on student success, concerning their preparation to effectively educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure; (b) to determine how to improve special educator preparation programs based on how special educators perceive their preparation experiences, to teach in alternative school settings. This research study may enhance positive social change and benefit alternative school sites by possibly improving the teaching methods and teacher preparation techniques. Another possible benefit of this research study could be a deeper understanding for some of the underlying reasons why students at risk of school failure dropout of school.

This research study may also lead to positive social change by providing transferable results for other school districts with alternative schools serving students at risk of school failure. Those results could provide special education teachers with a better understanding of their teaching methods. This research study may also provide insight for school principals that enhance collaboration between the teachers at the school sites. Moreover, by gaining a better understanding of the perceptions of special educators, concerning their preparation to effectively educate and advance the success of SEN students who are at risk of school failure, university coursework could improve based on

how special educators perceive their preparation experiences, to teach in alternative school settings.

Reflections

This research topic of special education teacher preparation has captivated my interest for many years as I work with various special educators in the profession. As a previous special educator, I have wondered how different preparation methods might improve student success. Moreover, as I consider the research topic and my selection of the participants, I wonder if the results would have differed with a different and larger group of participants.

Based on some of the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data collection, it appeared that all the participants were professionally and personally invested in their careers and students. My inference was that since they were all special educators, they would likely have more specialized teaching methods, be more organized and accountable for student success. Such an inference was incorrect. Moreover, a final reflection is that an underlying characteristic of an effective special educator is passion to teach the student population within alternative school settings. As a participant remarked, “This job is a calling; not everybody can do it.

Conclusion

The study’s results and the literature review reported that most special educators lack adequate preparation to work with SEN students who are at risk of school failure. The perceptions of 12 special educators who teach in an alternative school setting were involved in the study and based on their daily lived understandings. These perceptions

were evaluated from a phenomenological viewpoint and equated with research and professional opinions from interrelated literature. Educational experience and suitable preparation explicit for educating SEN students at risk of school failure in alternative school settings played an essential role in the perceptions of the participants. Theoretically, special educators' attitudes are a substantial aspect of student success, in addition to implementing effective evidence-based teaching practices in the alternative school setting.

Additionally, the study discovered that college educational preparatory programs and alternative schools would benefit from increasing the academic rigor of preliminary coursework. Such an undertaking is accomplishable by providing courses specifically designed to address language and mental health strategies to work with SEN students who are at risk of school failure within the alternative school. Furthermore, the study's overall findings revealed (a) special educators with insufficient preparation experience frustration in achieving success in alternative school settings; (b) additional inquiry regarding the specific preparation required for incoming special educators tasked to teach students at risk of school failure in their classrooms; (c) further need for understanding how administrators view incoming special educators' specific needs for teaching in alternative school settings; (d) further need to prepare special educators to address the mental health needs of SEN students who are at risk of school failure,; (e) further need to address language development challenges for students, as insufficient teacher preparation proves problematic to student success.

Research, as reported in the literature section, illustrates that nearly 45% of SEN students in the alternative school setting have identified learning disabilities, emotional

disturbances and language barriers that fuel frustration, poor motivation and low self-confidence that often impedes student success (Gagnon et al., 2012; Mallet, 2014). Consequently, special educators require rigorous preparation intended to develop student success within the alternative school setting, as most special educators perceive themselves as largely not prepared to teach students at-risk of school failure. As one of the study's participants vocalized, "I didn't feel prepared to do my job and not only was I frustrated, but I felt like I wasn't making the difference in student's lives that I set out to do when I entered the teaching profession in the first place."

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Appendix A: Interview Guide (Protocol/Questions)

Interview Objectives: To explore the perceptions of special educators, as guided by Deci & Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory and focused on student success, concerning their preparation to effectively educate and advance the success of students who are at risk of school failure in the greater Farmington, New Mexico area.

1. Greet the participant. Give a brief personal introduction of self and the format of the interview.

2. Thank participant for taking the time to be interviewed.

3. Explain the consent form to participant and have him/her sign it.

4. Inform the participant that the interview will be recorded, noting the date, time, and location.

5. Inform the participant that they will not be identified in the study, and only referred to as Teacher 1, Teacher 2, and so forth.

6. Begin interview.

7. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes in total for responses to the 10 questions in total (7 preliminary questions and 3 follow-up questions).

8. Read questions in the same order they are listed.

9. Take a moment to pause after each question to take notes and allow the participant to answer.

10. If the participant does not want to answer any question, he/she may stop the interview at any time for any reason. Participants are not obligated to answer all questions or finish the interview.

11. When the interview is complete, thank the participant for volunteering to be part of the study.

Interview Questions

1. Why did you acquire a special education teaching certificate?
2. What pathway did you pursue to obtain your teaching certificate . . .alternative, traditional college avenue?
3. Did you feel well-prepared to instruct upon being hired?
4. Did you learn about self-determination instructional methods in your teacher preparation?
5. What do you do to meet the special educational needs of your students in content area lessons?
6. How do you determine the practices you use to meet the academic and mental health needs of your students?
7. What aspect of academic development and advancement for your students is the greatest challenge for you?
8. What do you find most challenging about teaching the student population you do?
9. What are the most helpful or effective resources, supports, or professional development tools do you practice to achieve student success for your students?
10. If you had to come up with something that you would still need to better meet the mental health and academic needs of your students, what would it be?

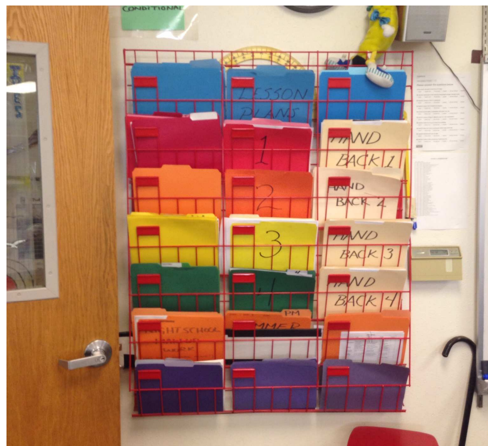
Appendix B: Demographics of Participants

The demographics of the participants were as follows:

- Participant 1- Male, Age 62 (Baby Boomer)
- Participant 2- Female, Age 26 (Millennial)
- Participant 3- Female, Age 41 (Generation X)
- Participant 4 - Female, Age 36 (Generation X)
- Participant 5 - Female, Age 37 (Generation X)
- Participant 6 - Female, Age 46 (Generation X)
- Participant 7- Female, Age 59 (Baby Boomer)
- Participant 8 – Female, Age 67 (Baby Boomer)
- Participant 9 – Female, Age 35 (Generation X)
- Participant 10 – Male, Age 63 (Baby Boomer)
- Participant 11 – Male, Age 64 (Baby Boomer)
- Participant 12 – Female, Age 24 (Millennial)

Appendix C: Participant Responses with Visual Representation

Image one of participant responses. Permission granted.

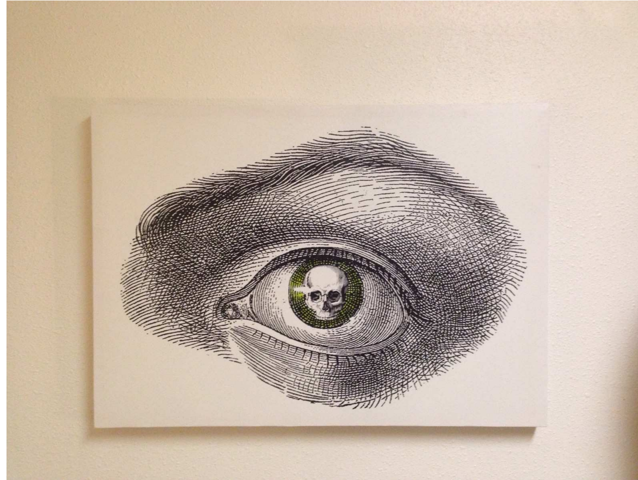


P4: “Everything about this place is structured. It’s actually a requirement for students excelling . . . not only are my desks and day really structured for the kids but the way I implement my lessons and studies. My students literally know how they will account for each minute of the day. . .”

Image two of participant responses. Permission granted.

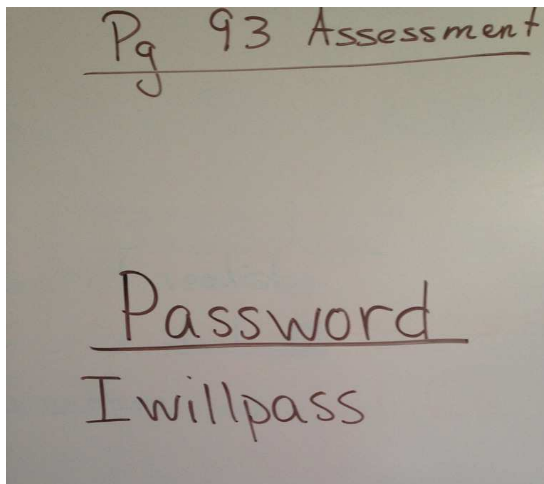
P12: Probably what’s most helpful for me to get these kids to open up about themselves is using art.”

Image three of participant responses. Permission granted.



P11: “Art has been immensely helpful in dealing with student self-esteem issues . . .”

Image five of participant responses. Permission granted.



P4: “Some of my students assume they can’t graduate because their parents didn’t. It’s like faulty wiring or something with their self-esteem. Building their self-esteem is in the little things (pause) Their password into their computer is *I-can-pass*. I figure if they type is a thousand times it’ll sink in.”

Image six of participant responses. Permission granted.

P8: “Attendance issues are big here. I think it always comes back to attendance issues. At least if we can get them here regularly, then we can work with them. We can help them identify what their struggles are personally and academically. We’ve been working on that and have gotten off (pause), well, a much better start than years past. We actually make them clock in so they can see if this was their job and they didn’t come they’d be fired.”