The Experiences of Rural Special Education Teachers Who Chose an Alternative Preparation Pathway

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Doris Nicole Glass
M. Ed., Thomas University, 2018
B.S. Ed., Troy State University, 1997

This dissertation, "The Experiences of Rural Special Education Teachers Who Chose an Alternative Preparation Pathway," by Doris Nicole Glass, is approved by:

Dissertation Committee Chair

Michael J. Bochenko. Ed.D.
Associate Professor
Leadership, Technology, & Workforce Development

Dissertation Committee Research Member

Kathy D. Nobles, Ed.D.
Assistant Professor
Leadership, Technology, & Workforce Development

Committee Member

Deborah G. Paine, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Leadership, Technology, & Workforce Development

Committee Member

John D. Lairsey, Ed.D.
Assistant Professor
Leadership, Technology, & Workforce Development

Associate Provost for Graduate Studies and Research

Becky K. da Cruz, J.D., Ph.D.
Associate Provost for Graduate Studies & Research
Professor of Criminal Justice

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ABSTRACT

Enrollment in traditional special education teacher preparation programs has declined while enrollment in alternative preparation programs has increased in Georgia (Georgia Insights, 2024). Since alternative preparation programs have become the viable recruitment vein for rural schools challenged to fill special education teaching vacancies, school administrators and alternative preparation program staff need a lens through which to view these teachers' unique experiences and subsequent needs so as not to perpetuate turnover and burnout. This study focused on exploring the experiences of individuals who are rural special education teachers who completed an alternative teacher preparation pathway, the Georiga Teacher Academy for Preparation and Pedagogy (GaTAPP). The study's methodology was rooted in a phenomenological approach using Seidman's (2013) three-interview series. The four participants, employed in different rural Georgia schools, had completed their GaTAPP program two years or less at the time of the interviews. The five emerging themes identified through data analysis were Motivation, GaTAPP Experiences, Challenges, Resources, and Improvements to Strengthen Alternative Program. Participants identified their beliefs, attitudes, and practices resulting from using an alternative preparation pathway for certification purposes. The study's results highlight the significance of rural school systems' and partnering education agencies' assessment of their efforts for collaboration to sustain and enhance partnerships focused on alternative preparation pathway programs for special education certification.

Keywords: rural special education teachers, alternative teacher preparation, Georgia Teacher Academy of Preparation and Pedagogy, special education teacher preparation.

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Chapter I

Overview

School systems nationwide have reported special education teacher shortages over several years (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Bruno et al., 2018; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Mamlin & Diliberto, 2020; More & Rodgers, 2020; Theobald et al., 2021). Teacher shortages have challenged school leaders to fill teacher vacancies, and teacher turnover has been costly and a perpetual cycle to recruit and train new teachers each year (Bettini et al., 2020). Associated costs included recruitment strategies and new teacher-specific programming and content training. High-poverty and rural schools experienced higher teacher turnover with projected increases in shortages due to unique recruitment and retention challenges (Bettini et al., 2020; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Bruno et al., 2018; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Green et al., 2020; Mamlin & Diliberto, 2020; Whitford et al., 2017). Special education teacher shortages have also impacted schools' abilities to effectively provide special education services to eligible students (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Bruno et al., 2018; Green et al., 2020; Whitford et al., 2017). Decreased teacher preparation program enrollment and increased turnover rates have perpetuated the special education teacher shortages (Espinoza et al., 2018). The special education teacher shortage has been duly noted with decades of research focused on exploring contributing factors yielding findings and recommendations targeting strategies to mediate the crisis. Alternative teacher preparation programs were developed to solve teacher shortages as

these programs accelerate teacher candidates' classroom entry (Bruno et al., 2018; Whitford et al., 2017).

As alternative teacher preparation programs have become more commonplace, school systems have had to embrace providing more job-embedded training (Mamlin & Diliberto, 2020). School administrators have been challenged to effectively train and support their special education teachers enrolled in alternative teacher preparation programs related to compliance with legal mandates and preparing for the specialized work demands of special education teachers (More & Rodgers, 2020). Critics have noted alternative teacher preparation programs compromise pedagogical, content, and classroom management knowledge attainment (Green et al., 2020). Alternative teacher preparation programs have tended to include more generic training and lacked the requisite specialized knowledge and skills emphasis required of special education teachers (Mamlin & Diliberto, 2020).

Early career special education teachers have a greater risk of attrition than their general education colleagues (Soini et al., 2019; Thornton et al., 2007). Espinoza et al. (2018) further clarified attrition has been greater for those teachers who are not pedagogically prepared and leave the profession at more than twice the rate as those who are more adeptly trained. Similarly, a greater attrition risk existed when teachers' work demands exceeded their capacity to meet the demands (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Miller et al. (1999) noted emergency licensed teachers were more likely to leave teaching, further supporting how teacher preparedness impacts teachers' intent to remain in the field. Indeed, alternative teacher preparation programs have provided different methods for recruiting individuals into special education. The absence of pre-requisite

coursework and field experiences before assuming a full-time teaching role lends different experiences than those provided through traditional teacher preparation programs.

Problem Statement

As the special education teacher shortage has remained a nationwide concern, school leaders have focused on understanding special education teacher burnout factors. Leaders have embraced employing special education teachers enrolled in alternative teacher preparation programs. Subsequently, leaders have strengthened and intensified induction support. Most alternative teacher preparation program designs have been generally structured and created a knowledge gap for special education alternative preparation program participants. School leaders have attempted to strengthen specialized training for such teachers. Have these efforts been sufficient to reduce the perpetual special education teacher burnout and turnover cycle? For alternative teacher preparation programs to be a viable solution to the special education teacher shortage, school administrators need a lens through which to view these teachers' unique experiences and subsequent needs. In hopes of retaining these teachers in the special education field, administrators' awareness of the teachers' beliefs and practices resulting from their experiences would be beneficial.

Purpose and Scope

This study focuses on exploring the experiences of individuals who are rural special education teachers and have chosen alternative teacher preparation pathways. The goal of this study is to inform rural special education directors, curriculum directors, human resource directors, and principals of relevant information related to supporting

their special education teachers enrolled in alternative teacher preparation programs. The information obtained through this study could foster improvement in rural school systems' teacher support practices, ultimately increasing the retention of special education teachers who chose an alternative teacher preparation pathway. Hearing these teachers' stories will allow school administrators to gain insights into teachers' perceptions of how their physical, psychological, social, and organizational job resources align with meeting their job demands as rural special education teachers while enrolled in alternative teacher preparation programs. This study will explore how these teachers describe their experiences and subsequent beliefs, practices, and attitudes as teachers and the implications for retention strategies. Three overarching research questions will guide the study.

Research Questions

Maxwell (2013) referred to research questions as "the heart" of research design as research questions serve to focus and guide the study (p. 73). The intent of this study is to hear the stories of rural special education teachers who chose an alternative teacher preparation pathway to inform rural special education directors, curriculum directors, human resource directors, and principals of relevant information related to supporting these teachers. The following research questions will guide this study:

Research Question 1: How do individuals describe their experiences becoming rural special education teachers using alternative preparation as their certification pathway?

Research Question 2: What beliefs and attitudes resulted from using an alternative preparation as a pathway for certification purposes?

Research Question 3: What practices resulted from using an alternative preparation as a pathway for certification purposes?

Alternative teacher preparation programs have provided a different method to recruit individuals into the special education field. The absence of pre-requisite coursework and field experiences before assuming a full-time teaching role leads to different experiences than those provided through traditional teacher preparation programs. Answering the first research question will provide information on these teachers' unique experiences. For alternative teacher preparation programs to be a viable solution to the special education teacher shortage, school administrators need a lens through which to view these teachers' unique needs. Bakker and Demerouti's (2007) job demands-resources theory provides a specific lens through which to consider these teachers' experiential meaning-making. This theory considers how individuals perceive the balance between the accessible resources to fulfill their job duties and responsibilities. This theory connects to answering the second and third research questions by highlighting these teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and practices resulting from pursuing an alternative preparation pathway for certification purposes. In hopes of retaining these teachers in the special education field, administrators' awareness of the teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and practices resulting from their experiences will be beneficial to inform retention practices.

Significance

The special education teacher shortage is not a new phenomenon. However, rural school systems continue to be challenged to fill special education teaching vacancies. Alternative teacher preparation programs allow school systems to employ career changers

interested in pursuing alternative entry into the special education field. These teachers need differentiated support than traditionally prepared special education teachers. Rural school systems have limited resources, posing additional challenges for effectively supporting these teachers. The significance of this study is to hear the stories of special education teachers who chose alternative preparation as their pathway to identify better the support they need through their preparation process and work experiences. Greater attrition risk exists when teachers' work demands exceed their capacity to meet these demands (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). For district and school administrators to effectively support these teachers in completing their work demands, it is imperative to understand their unique experiences and how those experiences inform their beliefs, attitudes, and practices. The information obtained in this study could foster improvement in rural school systems' teacher support practices, ultimately increasing the retention of special education teachers. The conceptual framework lends to understanding the balance of work demands and accessible resources for these teachers.

Conceptual Framework

Maxwell (2013) referenced different descriptors of conceptual frameworks; however, he broadened his descriptor for the term "to refer to the actual ideas and beliefs" the researcher has for the phenomena being studied (p. 39). Maxwell noted these ideas and beliefs could be portrayed through visual representations or narrative explanations, including theories, assumptions, and expectations to inform the study. Ravitch and Riggan (2017) highlighted the conceptual framework emphasizes the importance of the research and why the proposed methods are appropriate. Maxwell emphasized the conceptual framework is not something the researcher finds already

established or put together; instead, the researcher constructs the conceptual framework from personal experiential knowledge, existing research and theory, pilot or exploratory research, and thought experiments.

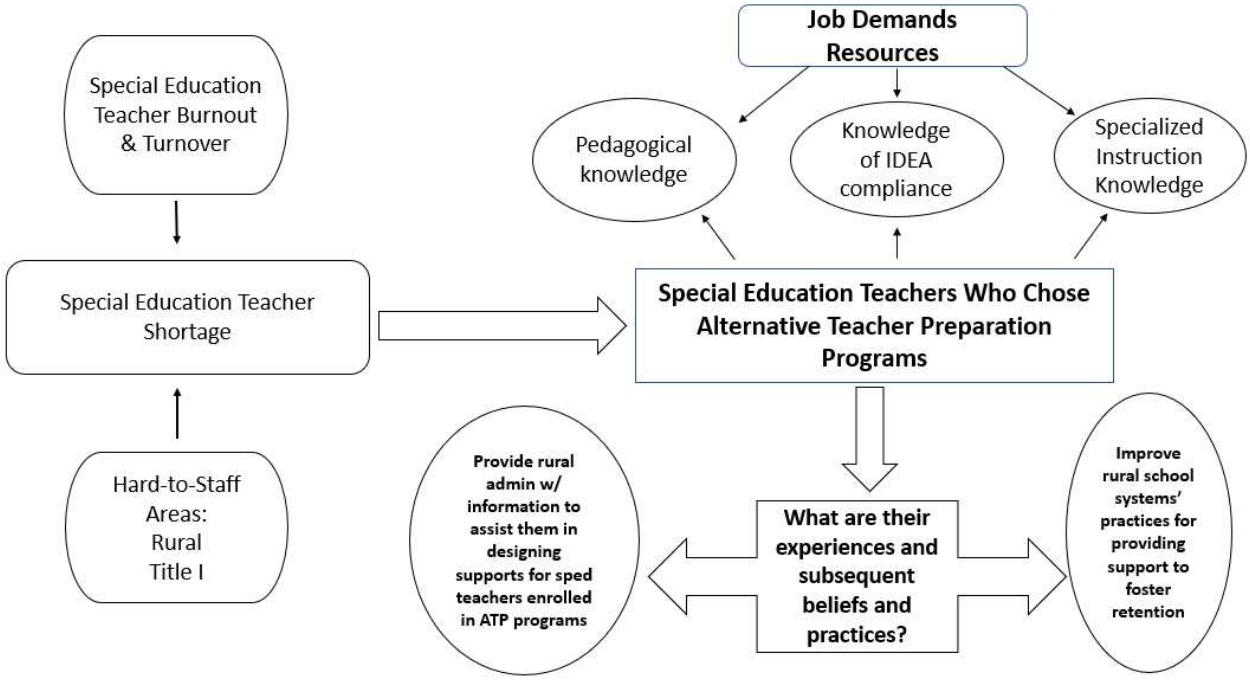
Bakker and Demerouti's (2007) job demands-resources theory is the foundation of the conceptual framework resulting from several iterations and reflections on the concepts associated with the special education teacher shortage and the resultant implications of alternative teacher preparation programs as a solution. The conceptual framework for this study includes experiential special education teacher knowledge and research relevant to the job demands-resources theory as critical elements. Figure 1 visually represents the conceptual framework's components. Special education teacher burnout and hard-to-staff areas, such as rural schools, contribute to the special education teacher shortage spurring the increased dependency on special education teachers choosing alternative preparation pathways. Critical areas for rural special education teachers serve as the job demands and job resources impacting these teachers' abilities and motivation for the work. Administrators' cognizance of these teachers' experiences informs retention practices.

Special education teachers require specialized knowledge relevant to compliance with Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) mandates. This includes knowledge of legal paperwork processes, monitoring and reporting student progress, recommendation and implementation of appropriate accommodations and support services, and knowledge of disability-specific specialized instructional strategies. Special education teachers enrolled in alternative teacher preparation programs do not generally learn this information through pre-requisite coursework. Instead, they attain this

knowledge through their work experiences and the support designed by the school system for which they are employed. Unless the teachers' backgrounds include knowledge of disabilities or IDEA (2004), then they begin their teaching role lacking knowledge essential to their duties and responsibilities.

Figure 1

Concept Map



Equally important as experiential special education teacher knowledge are theories relevant to understanding these special education teachers' experiences. A common contributing factor theme noted in the literature was having the resources to fulfill job duties and responsibilities. Bakker and Demerouti (2007) developed the job demands-resources theory. Although this theory can be applied to various occupations, it was well-noted in the teacher burnout literature. A key tenet of the job demands-resources theory is employees are more inclined to burn out when their job demands exceed their access to relevant physical, mental, and emotional resources to complete the

tasks associated with their job (Demerouti et al., 2001). The job demands-resources model suggests job strain and motivation result from the interaction of job demands and job resources (Simbula, 2010).

The key principle of the interaction of job demands and job resources connects answering the research questions by providing a lens for viewing rural special education teachers' experiences while actively pursuing alternative preparation pathways. An additional component of the job demands-resources theory is the motivational process fostering work engagement and organizational commitment (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Hakanen et al., 2006; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Do these teachers perceive they have adequate resources to meet their job demands? If so, what are the resources they perceive as necessary? If not, what resources are they lacking? Knowing this information in conjunction with their experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and practices will inform special education directors, curriculum directors, human resource directors, and principals of potential resource needs to foster program completion and work engagement. Concerning these teachers' experiences, the job demands-resources theory will provide a framework for understanding how these teachers perceive their knowledge, training, and experiential resources to fulfill their job duties as rural special education teachers.

According to the job demands-resources theory, high job demands combined with low job resources may lead to burnout and decreased work engagement (Demerouti et al., 2001). Job demands are not always negatively perceived but may continue as job stressors over time. Hakanen and Roodt (2010) highlighted the distinction between challenge stressors, which yield personal growth and achievement, and hindrance stressors, which impede personal growth and achievement. High job resources in

combination with low or high-level job demands may increase job motivation and engagement. The job demands-resources theory best suits this study because it provides a lens for viewing these teachers' experiences regarding job demands versus job resources. Through the job demands-resources theory, school administrators will understand the physical, psychological, social, and organizational aspects of the resources available to these teachers and their jobs' physical, psychological, social, and organizational aspects. Ultimately, considering the job demands-resources theory will enable school administrators to consider the job demands balance for rural special education teachers pursuing an alternative teacher preparation pathway.

The components of the conceptual framework provide the structure for building and defining the study's methods and design. Just as there have been iterations to building and defining this conceptual framework, cognizance of the iterative process moving forward is necessary. A proposed structure has been established as outlined in the following sections. However, the participants and their stories will determine any relevant iterations and adjustments through the research process.

Summary of Methodology

Population

Study participants will be employed in rural school systems as special education teachers and completed an alternative teacher preparation program. Various educational service agencies provide alternative teacher preparation programs and contain candidate pools meeting the identified participant criteria. Communication with individuals concerning their interest in participating in the study will be conducted through the educational service agencies' personnel and schools' human resource departments unless

consent is provided for communicating with candidates directly. Individuals meeting participant criteria and agreeing to participate will become study participants; four to six participants are needed for this study. Purposeful random sampling will yield the proposed study participants.

Data Collection Methods

A narrative inquiry interviewing approach is appropriate, considering the process relevant to answering the research questions. A Seidman-style interview utilizing a three-interview series with each participant will be appropriate to foster rich data. Patton (2015) indicated "the fundamental principle of qualitative interviewing is to provide a framework within which respondents can express their own understanding in their own terms" (p. 442). Using a combined interview format consisting of a standardized open-ended interview and an interview guide for this study is appropriate.

Participants will share their experiences as rural special education teachers in alternative teacher preparation programs and their resultant beliefs, attitudes, and practices as special education teachers. Standardized open-ended questions will be critical to ensure all participants respond to questions focused on these concepts. By the nature of hearing their individual stories as they reconstruct their experiences and explore the meaning-making of those experiences, it will be imperative to have the flexibility to incorporate additional questions as their responses align with the need for further clarification or deeper exploration.

Each interview will be scheduled over at least three sessions and based on the interviewee's preference. When at all possible, the interviews will be held in person. In such cases, the interview will be recorded via an audio recorder. When in-person

interviews are not possible, the interviews will be held via Microsoft Teams or Google Meets. In such cases, the interview will be recorded using the online platform recording feature. Transcribing and researcher memoing will be completed in between each interview session.

Data Analysis Procedures

Saldaña (2016) suggested qualitative techniques relevant to the data analysis of Research Question 1, Research Question 2, and Research Question 3. Given the magnitude of the codifying and categorizing process, analytic memos will be necessary to guide and shape the analysis process. MAXQDA will be used to assist with analysis techniques. Descriptive coding will be used to analyze all researcher memos. Descriptive coding is an appropriate technique as it will aid in identifying categories. In Vivo coding and concept coding will be used to analyze all interview transcripts. In Vivo coding is an appropriate analysis technique as it focuses on the participants' stories, which are the core of this study. Concept coding will provide a lens for overarching ideas identified in the data. This will be an iterative process involving recoding and recategorizing; code mapping may assist with the organization for clarity. The generated codes will be categorized. This will then lend to categorically theming the data. Reflection on the research questions throughout the coding, categorizing, and theming processes will ensure alignment and connectivity to answer the intended research questions.

Limitations

This study focuses specifically on special education teachers who chose alternative teacher preparation pathways and are employed in rural schools. The findings of this study would not be generalizable to traditionally prepared teachers or teachers

employed in urban school systems. Possible biases and reactivity must be addressed regarding the validity of potential answers to the research questions. Kim (2016) highlighted the conscious process of reflexivity at all phases to stay mindful of the role of the researcher in the study. In addition, setting the stage for collecting rich data will reduce plausible threats. It will be imperative to include member checks routinely. This will be an intentional process allowing participants to review the designation of codes, categories, themes, and associated narratives to correct possible misinterpretations of participants' responses. The framing of the research questions should remain focused on hearing the participants' stories to avoid validity concerns.

Definitions of Terms

Attrition. Teacher attrition is the loss of teachers from the teaching profession (Borman & Dowling, 2014).

Alternative Teacher Preparation Program. Alternative teacher preparation programs are non-traditional routes to teacher certification. The state of Georgia offers alternative routes to teacher certification for individuals with a bachelor's degree and who have not completed a teacher preparation program (Georgia Rule 505-3-.01., 2022).

Burnout. Teacher burnout is a psychological state reflective of prolonged response to chronic job stressors resulting in emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced job accomplishment. (Roloff et al., 2022).

Traditional Preparation Program. Traditional teacher preparation programs are credit-bearing programs offered through accredited 4-year colleges and universities designed for the preparation of educators comprised of coursework, classroom

observation, and supervised field experience. (Georgia Professional Standards Commission, 2023).

Summary

Special education teacher shortages have impacted schools' abilities to effectively provide special education services to eligible students (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Bruno et al., 2018; Green et al., 2020; Whitford et al., 2017). Special education teacher burnout and the subsequent special education teacher shortage are core concepts resulting in the development of alternative teacher preparation programs. There is an urgency for school administrators to understand the experiences of teachers completing alternative certification pathways, as this route has become a viable option for filling special education teaching vacancies. Understanding these teachers' experiences and subsequent teaching beliefs, attitudes, and practices can inform school systems' retention strategies for alternative certification pathway participants.

Chapter II focuses on the literature supporting the need to explore the experiences of rural special education teachers who chose alternative teacher preparation pathways. Information on alternative teacher preparation program designs, teacher burnout, teacher turnover, and subsequent implications for rural schools are relevant to understanding the need for this study. Chapter III describes the qualitative methodology to answer the research questions.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Special education teacher shortages have impacted schools' abilities to effectively provide special education services to eligible students (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Bruno et al., 2018; Green et al., 2020; Whitford et al., 2017). The Georgia Department of Education Teacher Pipeline database, Georgia Insights, reflected demand for 3,989 special education teachers for the 2022-2023 school year with a supply of 1,085 teachers exiting preparation programs. Alternative teacher preparation programs were developed to aid the teacher shortage crisis and fill more teaching vacancies as traditional teacher preparation program enrollment declined (Bruno et al., 2018; Whitford et al., 2017). These alternative teacher preparation pathways appealed to career changers and others who may not otherwise have considered traditional teacher preparation programs.

Researchers attempted to examine the effectiveness of alternative preparation pathways as alternative teacher preparation programs became more prevalent; however, various program models existed, making relevant comparisons challenging. Common alternative preparation pathway models required less pre-service coursework and more job-embedded training, resulting in critics citing the compromise of pedagogical, content, and classroom management knowledge attainment (Espinoza et al., 2018; Green et al., 2020). Alternative teacher preparation programs tended to focus on general education components and lacked skills emphasis for special education teachers (Mamlin & Diliberto, 2020). Further exploration of career changers' experiences has been necessary

to recruit and retain individuals in rural areas seeking to enter the special education field through an alternate preparation pathway. The following research questions served to guide the literature review focus:

Research Question 1: How do individuals describe their experiences becoming rural special education teachers using alternative preparation as their certification pathway?

Research Question 2: What beliefs and attitudes resulted from using an alternative preparation as a pathway for certification purposes?

Research Question 3: What practices resulted from using an alternative preparation as a pathway for certification purposes?

This review examined the literature relevant to exploring alternatively prepared rural special education teachers' experiences. Considering the research on alternative teacher preparation programs and the concepts attributed to such programs' formation, including special education teacher burnout, turnover, and the subsequent teacher shortage, was critical. Decades of research on the special education teacher shortage existed, and Billingsley's (2005) compilation of this research served as a guide for reviewing the literature. The concepts of teacher turnover and teacher burnout were prevalent in the special education teacher shortage literature and prompted further exploration in each area separately. The research thoroughly noted factors attributed to teacher turnover and burnout, subsequent implications for schools, and potential solutions. However, if easy solutions existed, there would not continue to be a special education teacher shortage.

Rural school systems' structural organization has significantly varied from urban or city school systems, so it was critical to consider the research relevant to rural school systems' recruitment and retention of special education teachers. The literature focused on rural systems' recruitment challenges and potential retention solutions; however, less research existed on the long-term impacts of implementing proposed solutions in rural systems. The continued shortage suggests the potential solutions were not viable or not implemented with fidelity.

The theme of teachers' duties and responsibilities versus teachers' abilities to fulfill those duties was prevalent in the special education teacher turnover and burnout literature. This concept guided the focus on the foundational conceptual framework component of the job demands-resources theory. Bakker and Demerouti's (2007) job demands-resources model suggested individuals' perceptions of their jobs' demands versus their perceptions of the accessible resources to do their jobs informs job engagement and potential burnout. Knowledge of this model and potential job demands and resources relatedness was essential for exploring rural special education teachers' beliefs, practices, and attitudes resulting from alternative certification pathway preparation. This information lends to consideration of perpetuating burnout factors through what has been deemed a solution to the special education teacher shortage crisis.

Special Education Teacher Burnout

The literature defined burnout in three components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment; emotional exhaustion was considered the central burnout quality (Lee & Eissenstat, 2018). Teacher burnout was recognized as an ongoing issue, particularly for special education teachers, as they

experienced increased stress and burnout risk (Soini et al., 2019). The findings of a 5-year longitudinal study of 760 special education teachers indicated their teaching roles exceeded above-average stress levels (Soini et al., 2019). Special education teachers' intermediary role in fostering inclusive classroom and school practices was noted to contribute to teachers' emotional exhaustion (Soini et al., 2019). General education teachers' reluctance and resistance to include students with disabilities impeded special educators' work. Special education teachers also expressed emotional exhaustion when working with students with emotional and behavioral difficulties (Soini et al., 2019). Soini et al. (2019) noted special education teachers were often perceived to excel in establishing relationships with their students. However, special education teachers reported they lacked support from colleagues when experiencing personal rapport challenges with students (Soini et al., 2019). This study's findings highlighted the interpersonal burnout factors for special education teachers and suggested implications for schools' culture and climate practices to deter burnout.

Novice special education teachers and those lacking adequate preparation also experienced increased stress and more significant burnout (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Soini et al., 2019). Brownell et al. (2002) noted novice and underprepared special education teachers were expected to meet the exact demands of veteran and adeptly prepared special education teachers. Such demands included academic content expertise, research-based practices expertise, and federal and state compliance expertise, requiring considerable preparation and implementation support (Brownell et al., 2002). Working conditions and lack of administrative support were broadly identified burnout stressors cited by novice special education teachers (Thornton et al., 2007). Further identification

of working conditions stressors included student behavior problems, legally mandated paperwork compliance, and educational reform's impacts (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Soini et al., 2019; Thornton et al., 2007).

Student caseload size and role clarity were also closely associated with increased burnout indicators, as cited in a survey of 211 special education teachers (Cancio et al., 2018). This study sought to explore special education teachers' perceived stressors and subsequent coping strategies. Large caseloads and lack of role clarity were dominant stressors for these special education teachers; these stressors resulted from a shortage of special education teachers in their respective schools (Cancio et al., 2018). Organizational structure, including service delivery models, disability-specific instructional needs, and non-instructional responsibilities, also complicated role clarity for special education teachers (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Lack of awareness and understanding of these special education-specific working conditions contributed to burnout and the perpetual teacher shortage (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

The literature noted special education teachers needed more administrative and staff development support related to instructional planning and student behavioral challenges (Bettini et al., 2020; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). Special education teachers' instructional planning responsibilities covered multiple grade levels, ability levels, and content areas depending on student caseloads or special education service delivery models. This is challenging and stressful for veteran teachers and particularly overwhelming for novice or underprepared special education teachers. General education teachers also noted student behavioral challenges as stressors and areas they needed more support; however, special education teachers typically faced unique behavioral challenges

reiterating the need for requisite disability-specific knowledge and increased staff development opportunities (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

Thornton et al. (2007) identified special education teachers' perceived support resources. These resources included district and school administrative support, collegial support, and staff development support. Burnout was noted when support was lacking from these resources (Bettini et al., 2020; Cancio et al., 2018; Thornton et al., 2007)

Cancio et al. (2018) and Bettini et al. (2020) used the conservation of resources theoretical framework to analyze special education teachers' responses to stress and burnout surveys. Like the job-demands resources model, the conservation of resources theory suggested "when demands and resources are balanced, employees feel able to manage responsibilities" (Bettini et al., 2020, p. 311). Cancio et al. (2018) referenced Hobfoll's 1993 assumptions of the conservation of resources theory: "Individuals are faced with limited resources of time and energy, and in response to prolonged periods of high demands and low resources, they demonstrate reduced energy and do not complete responsibilities" (p. 459). Without adequate administrative, collegial, and staff development support, special education teachers experienced more significant stress and increased burnout (Bettini et al., 2020; Cancio et al., 2018; Thornton et al., 2007).

Researchers thoroughly examined special education teacher burnout. The literature included special education teachers' perceived stressors and subsequent impact. Studies noted areas requiring more administrative, collegial, and staff development support. The literature also provided leadership insights fostering special education teacher retention. Special education teachers' unique duties and responsibilities required

specific approaches to understanding stress and burnout, including efforts to support their job-specific demands and increase their accessible resources to meet these demands.

Special Education Teacher Turnover

Billingsley (2005) defined attrition as the "loss of teachers from schools" and noted different attrition terms: leaving, moving, switching, transferring, exiting, and turnover (p. 11). Teacher turnover and teacher attrition were predominantly noted in the literature. These terms were used synonymously for this review as both reflect the absence of special education teachers. The literature explored special education teacher turnover factors closely linked to burnout indicators and special education teacher turnover implications.

Approximately 90% of the nationwide teacher demand was created by teachers leaving the profession (Espinoza et al., 2018). The stressors previously noted led to teacher attrition and turnover when left unaddressed (Bettini et al., 2020; Cancio et al., 2018; Espinoza et al., 2018; Thornton et al., 2007). Teachers indicated reasons for leaving other than retirement included inadequate preparation and mentoring, little or no administrative support, poor teaching conditions, low salaries, and state-mandated assessment pressures (Espinoza et al., 2018). Special education positions were sometimes perceived to be entry-level positions for later transitioning to general education positions outside of special education (Mitchem et al., 2006). Intent to remain in the field was higher when special education teachers perceived strong administrative and collegial support (Bettini et al., 2020).

Special education teacher turnover rates doubled general education teacher turnover rates, and attrition was highest among new special education teachers

(McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008; Sayman et al., 2018). Georgia surpassed the national average of special education teacher attrition rates, with approximately 50% leaving the field (Childre, 2014). Attrition was described as severe in rural schools, and continual attrition exposed students to ineffective teaching (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008). Less qualified and experienced teachers were employed in high-poverty and rural schools more frequently, while highly qualified teachers served higher socioeconomic students at higher rates than low socioeconomic students (Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Green et al., 2020). This profoundly impacted the quality of special education services provided to students with disabilities in high-poverty and rural schools. The inclusion of students with disabilities into the general education setting and offering instruction in their least restrictive environment was jeopardized and posed legal concerns for school leaders (Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Green et al., 2020). Teacher turnover posed financial challenges for schools through the perpetual cycle of recruiting and training new teachers each year (Bettini et al., 2020). Associated costs included recruitment strategies and new teacher-specific programming and content training (Bettini et al., 2020).

The 2023 retention rate of special education teachers in Georgia was 89.81%, slightly lower than in 2019 with 91.86% retention; the 2023 Southwest Georgia region special education teacher attrition rate was 77.99% (Georgia Insights, 2024). Early career special education teachers had a greater risk of attrition than their general education colleagues (Soini et al., 2019; Thornton et al., 2007). Special education teachers who were not fully certified had a greater attrition risk than new, fully certified special education teachers (Brownell et al., 2002). Childre (2014) suggested attrition data indicated teacher candidates were exiting teacher preparation programs inadequately

prepared for special education teacher roles. Low teacher efficacy was associated with high attrition rates and perpetuated the turnover cycle (Harrington & Walsh, 2022). Although federal and state guidelines were established to ensure highly qualified staff are equitably distributed, the reality of struggling to fill teaching vacancies remains a factor for rural and high-poverty schools and threatens these schools' abilities to provide an appropriate education to students with disabilities (Brownell et al., 2002; Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Green et al., 2020).

Special Education Teacher Shortages in Rural Schools

Approximately 15% of all public-school students were eligible for special education services in 2021-2022, reflecting an upward trend from 14% in the 2019-2020 school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023a). The special education teacher shortage increased since 2012, resulting in approximately 23,000 special education positions lacking qualified teachers (Peyton et al., 2021). Approximately 40% of public schools reported having great difficulty filling special education teaching vacancies during the 2020-2021 school year. This was a significant increase from 17% of public schools reporting difficulty during the 2010-2011 school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023b). Brownell et al. (2004) noted the United States Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs spent approximately $90 million annually to combat the chronic shortage, yet the efforts proved insufficient. Do challenges associated with teacher shortages translate equally to urban, suburban, and rural schools?

The literature noted the uniqueness of rural communities and their school systems. Oyen and Schweinle (2020) acknowledged varying descriptors of "rural" existed;

however, most definitions referenced distance from populous locations and population density. Burrola et al. (2023) suggested rural communities significantly depended on their schools as the school often served as the only local institution and source of civic engagement. Rural communities and ways of living vary greatly from urban and suburban communities. In their narrative analysis of rural teachers, Burton et al. (2013) highlighted the impact the agrarian lifestyle and homogeneous cultures of rural communities had in schools; rural school settings were challenging for teachers who lacked understanding of this lifestyle and culture. Tran et al. (2020) interviewed rural teachers who identified the advantages of teaching in rural schools: school and community partnerships, higher community status for educators, lower cost of living, and greater teacher autonomy. These same teachers identified the disadvantages of teaching in rural schools: small-town politics, fewer amenities, poverty, lack of industry, and cultural exchange barriers (Tran, 2020). Similarly, Simmons (2005) surveyed 64 preservice teachers about their field experiences in rural schools. Survey data indicated the following areas were identified as challenges during their rural school experience: limited housing options, professional isolation, and limited facilities and personnel (Simmons, 2005). Rural schools traditionally had lower levels of financial resources based on education finance funding formulas, which puts rural schools at a critical disadvantage in teacher recruitment compared to urban and suburban schools (Nguyen, 2020).

Goldhaber et al. (2010) conducted a study examining the uniqueness of rural school districts and subsequent teacher staffing challenges. The study noted school districts classified as urban or suburban had significantly lower vacancy rates than rural

school districts. Rural schools averaged an additional ten teaching vacancies per 100 teachers more than suburban schools (Goldhaber et al., 2010). The findings indicated distance from urban centers with limited social and living resource access contributed to staffing challenges. Distance from teacher preparation programs was also linked to rural schools' staffing challenges (Goldhaber et al., 2010). Teacher preparation programs tended to be in urban or suburban areas, and teacher candidates' preservice and student teaching assignments were near the teacher preparation program. Teacher candidates typically gained employment where they completed preservice and student teaching tasks (Goldhaber et al., 2010).

Jameson et al. (2019) referenced special education teacher shortage projections, citing the need for 33,000 more special education teachers through 2026, with low-incidence disability category teachers for rural areas the greatest need. Low-incidence disabilities require the most intensive support, including autism, sensory impairments, and significant intellectual disabilities. The demands of special education positions in rural schools required teachers to handle diverse disability caseloads outside their training and certification areas, contributing to turnover and shortages (Jameson et al., 2019). Weiss et al. (2023) noted rural schools and communities have fewer differential resources and related service providers, so special education teachers often served multiple support roles to meet students' disability-specific needs. A challenge for rural schools compared to urban schools was higher percentages of culturally and linguistically diverse special education students compounded by a lack of relevant multicultural pedagogy in teacher preparation programs (Peterson et al., 2020). Brownell et al. (2004) noted schools were

less likely to recruit special education teachers with developed pedagogical knowledge and content expertise because of the perpetual shortage cycle.

Berry et al. (2011) surveyed 373 rural administrators in 43 states, and 51% reported moderate to extreme difficulties filling special education teacher vacancies. More than 50% of the administrators noted they hired at least one teacher identified as not highly qualified per federal standards at the time (Berry et al., 2011). Seven percent of participating school systems could not fill all special education teaching vacancies for the school year (Berry et al, 2011). Administrators' survey responses indicated competition from larger school districts, geographic location, and salary greatly affected special education teacher retention in their rural school systems (Berry et al, 2011).

A perpetual cycle of special education teacher shortages was noted due to an insufficient supply of teachers due to decreased teacher preparation program enrollment and increased attrition and turnover rates (Espinoza et al., 2018). Efforts to combat the shortage cycle included comprehensive induction support and increased administrative support efforts (Espinoza et al., 2018). Most strategies suggested to combat the teacher shortage were associated with additional costs for school systems without additional funds to leverage these strategies, such as financial and tuition compensation for potential teacher recruits (Espinoza et al., 2018; Thornton et al., 2007). Although these were noted as viable strategies to combat the teacher shortage, these have continued to pose challenges for rural school systems without additional designated funding.

States created alternative teacher preparation programs to address teacher shortages (Bruno et al., 2018; Espinoza et al., 2018; Newton et al., 2020; Sayman et al., 2018; Whitford et al., 2017). However, rural school systems struggled with special

education teacher recruitment and retention efforts despite alternative teacher preparation program options. Brownell et al. (2005) noted fewer adults outside of metropolitan areas hold bachelor's degrees, reducing this option's viability in rural areas. Less than 20% of rural Georgia residents had a bachelor's degree or higher in 2021, compared to almost 36% of urban residents in Georgia (University of Georgia, 2022). Remote locations, lack of resources, limited professional development opportunities, and demands for handling diverse disability caseloads impeded rural school systems' special education teacher recruitment and retention efforts (Berry et al., 2011; Brownell et al., 2002; Jameson et al., 2019). However, traditional teacher preparation program enrollment data reiterates rural school systems' dependency on alternative teacher preparation programs for special education teachers.

Alternative Teacher Preparation Programs

It is the intent and responsibility of special education teacher preparation programs to prepare teacher candidates to educate the complete range of students with disabilities across various settings and content areas (Nagro & deBettencourt, 2017). Awareness of the evolution of teacher preparation programs is critical to understanding the differences between traditional teacher preparation programs and alternative teacher preparation programs and pathways. In their review of the history of traditional special education teacher preparation programs, Brownell et al. (2010) highlighted the major preparation program trends identified over time: initial teacher preparation programs were conducted in residential facilities, then transitioned to teachers' colleges to align with compulsory education requirements; preparation programs shifted to categorical disability approaches by the 1970s; noncategorical approaches appeared in the 1980s;

program focus shifted to inclusive educational practices in the 1990s which led to mandates for preparation programs emphasizing academic content area focus on producing what legislation identified as highly qualified and now professionally qualified special education teachers. These shifts in special education teacher preparation program focus resulted from political contexts at the time, research, and federal legislation. The initial focus of categorical disability in preparation programs was reflected through special education law coursework and disability-specific coursework for teaching and assessment methods tailored to the disability area track selected by the teacher candidate (Brownell et al., 2010). The shift to the noncategorical approach resulted from behavioral psychology research and shortages of qualified teachers for specific disability areas. Special education teacher preparation programs shifted to emphasize instructional and classroom management coursework for multiple disability areas (Brownell et al., 2010). The shift to inclusive practices in special education propelled teacher preparation programs to consider integrated teacher preparation programs consisting of general education and special education teacher candidates taking some of the same coursework; integrated program approaches varied by institution and state (Brownell et al., 2010).

Field experiences are cornerstone to traditional teacher preparation programs. In their review of field experience literature, Nagro and deBettencourt (2017) noted varied definitions of field experiences and associated terms, including student teaching, practicum, and internship; however, the literature consistently noted these supervised classroom-based experiences were critical to teacher candidate preparation to allow opportunities to apply the strategies and approaches learned in coursework and engage in all aspects of the profession under direct supervision. Brownell et al. (2005) reviewed

traditional special education teacher preparation program design and identified these common characteristics: extensive field experiences, collaborative emphasis, inclusion and cultural diversity emphasis, program evaluation practices, and positivist or constructivist orientation.

Alternative teacher preparation programs have become valued certification pathways (Espinoza et al., 2018; Whitford et al., 2017). The Georgia Professional Standards Commission (GaPSC, 2023) recognizes two alternative pathways to special education certification. Both pathways allow eligible individuals to qualify for a non-renewable educator certificate before completing an approved certification program and simultaneously employed as a special education teacher. Eligibility requirements include a bachelor's degree or higher and successful completion of the Georgia Educator Ethics Assessment. From the issuance of the non-renewable certificate, individuals have three years to complete a special education certification program. One alternative pathway allows these certificate holders to complete a traditional certification-only or master's degree program (GaPSC, 2023). A second alternative pathway is the Georgia Teacher Academy for Preparation and Pedagogy (GaTAPP), an alternative teacher preparation program (GaPSC, 2023). Eligible GaTAPP providers are located throughout the state in partnership with local educational agencies. Georgia Rule 505-3-.05 (2022) outlines the standards and requirements of GaTAPP programs and participants. Candidates receive training, professional development, and coaching in job-embedded experiences in four competencies: planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction, and professional responsibilities. Evidence of proficiency in identified pedagogical content standards and dispositions is also required.

The literature noted a range of alternative teacher preparation program models, and like traditional teacher preparation programs, the programs' quality varied (Espinoza et al., 2018; Wilcox & Samaras, 2009). In her examination and review of alternative teacher preparation programs specifically for special education teachers, Quigney (2010) noted significant variance of programs within and across states. However, a key benefit of alternative preparation pathways included getting teachers in classrooms quicker than traditional teacher preparation programs. This provided a reprieve for struggling school leaders facing filling teaching vacancies with otherwise little to no candidates.

The literature appeared divided regarding alternative teacher preparation program effectiveness largely due to the variance of program models. Critics deemed fast-track alternative certification pathways as "sink or swim" or "learning by doing" approaches contributing to teacher turnover (Guha et al., 2016). However, traditional teacher preparation programs can be ineffective if not properly designed. Boe et al. (2007) explored teacher preparation program models and used chi-square tests of statistical significance to analyze national public school data to explore the relationship between teacher preparation program design and teacher qualification indicators. Special education teachers who completed teacher preparation programs comprised of 10 or more weeks of practice teaching, relevant coursework, and observational feedback were more likely to report being prepared to teach (Boe et al., 2007). Their findings indicated extensive teacher preparation programs, including traditional and alternative preparation programs, produced more effective teachers than less extensive programs (Boe et al., 2007). Guha et al. (2016) explored teacher residency programs as part of teacher preparation and certification pathways. Their findings indicated 80-90% retention rates

after 3 years and 70-80% after 5 years of teachers who attained certification through programs with teacher residency program design (Guha et al, 2016).

In their meta-analysis of traditional and alternative teacher preparation programs, Whitford et al. (2017) indicated teachers who chose alternative preparation pathways yielded different teaching effectiveness for varying subjects and grade levels. Their study further noted it was challenging to discern alternative preparation program teacher effectiveness due to the disproportionate representation of alternatively certified teachers in high-poverty schools and harder-to-staff areas such as rural regions and special education assignments (Whitford et al., 2017). Nourgaret et al. (2005) compared observation and evaluation results of 1st-year special education teachers, including 20 who completed a traditional teacher preparation program and 20 who were going through emergency licensure programs. The experienced and trained observer did not know the teachers' certification status and used Charlotte Danielson's 1996 teaching framework to conduct classroom observations during the second half of the school year. Results indicated the traditionally trained teachers' evaluation scores were significantly higher than those teaching on emergency teacher licenses (Nourgaret et al., 2005). Whether traditionally prepared or alternatively prepared, it is imperative to remember with mentoring and support, novice teachers experience tremendous growth over the first few years of teaching (Espinoza et al., 2018).

The 2015-2016 teacher certification data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2022) indicated approximately 18% of all public school teachers entered teaching through an alternative route certification program. From this pool of approximately 676,000 alternatively certified teachers, 35% indicated they were engaged

in work unrelated to education the year prior to teaching. Approximately 20% were special education teachers, which was higher than average, and approximately 39% taught in high-poverty schools. The literature included an exploration of individuals' motivation for pursuing alternative teacher preparation pathways. Newton et al. (2020) conducted case studies to consider who pursued and completed alternative teacher preparation programs. From the 58 study participants, Newton et al. (2020) found financial factors, including lower costs or grant and scholarship opportunities, motivated many program participants. Jameson et al.'s (2019) study on the impact of federal grants on the recruitment of special education teacher candidates for alternative preparation pathway programs in rural communities noted an immediate and sustained impact. General education teachers and paraprofessionals already employed in rural systems were quality candidates for these alternative preparation program grant opportunities yielding quality special education teachers. The federal grant terms required teachers to commit to a minimum of 4 years of service to the rural schools curbing the critical special education teacher shortage in participating school systems. The findings highlighted the need for external funding for rural school systems to sustain teacher recruitment efforts (Jameson et al., 2019).

Hogan and Bullock (2012) conducted focus groups and analyzed survey responses of 651 participants and noted job placement and the ability to earn a salary during program participation attracted alternative teacher preparation program participants. These programs allowed some career changers to utilize their prior content knowledge and skills (Hogan & Bullock, 2012). Stephens and Fish (2010) conducted a qualitative study in which they interviewed 15 participants pursuing a special education alternative

preparation pathway. Their participants indicated specific motivations for program enrollment were having disabled family members, student empathy, and available job vacancy (Stephens & Fish, 2010).

If the pursuit of special education alternative preparation pathways precipitated solely on job vacancy, did such participants have an awareness of the requisite special education knowledge? The literature included alternative teacher preparation program teacher preparedness information and tended to reflect general alternative teacher preparation program design with little literature devoted to special education alternative teacher preparation programs specifically. There was great emphasis on areas teachers considered challenging and provided less preparation. It is important to note common concerns and challenges intersected with concern areas related to special education teacher burnout.

Considering program participants' concerns, Wilcox and Samaras (2009) explored career changers' first-year teaching experiences. The case studies included four teachers yielding three emerging experience themes: difficulty meeting time demands, difficulty managing student behavior and needs, and mentor appreciation. Sayman et al. (2018) explored alternatively certified special education teachers' 1st three years of experience. Their qualitative study, which included 35 participants enrolled in a special education alternative teacher preparation program, highlighted the need for additional student behavior preparedness support. This study reiterated specialized requisite special education training needs. Sayman et al. (2018) noted other preparedness needs, including classroom management, collegial collaboration, evidence-based practices, and support staff relationships. Although the literature included relevant program support

recommendations, few studies examined alternative teacher preparation program completion. Newton et al. (2020) noted alternative teacher preparation programs had high dropout rates. In addition, their study highlighted the need for program completion support. More and Rodgers (2020) examined a special education alternative teacher preparation program design and noted the need to align their programs better to address participants' needs for program completion and preparedness.

The Georgia Insight's Educator Pipeline Dashboard (2024) indicated increased special education teacher certification pathway completers in Georgia from 2017-2021. In 2017, 792 individuals completed a special education teacher certification pathway; 627 completed a traditional teacher preparation program, and 165 completed an alternative preparation program. In 2021, 1,136 individuals completed a special education teacher certification pathway; 804 completed a traditional teacher preparation program, and 332 completed an alternative preparation pathway. The increase in the percentage of alternative preparation program completers is reflective of the need for continued emphasis on understanding the beliefs, attitudes, and practices of these individuals.

Some literature gaps were noted after reviewing the literature relevant to exploring alternatively prepared special education teachers' experiences. The literature thoroughly examined special education teacher burnout related to the special education teacher shortage. However, a gap existed in exploring alternatively prepared special education teacher burnout. Little literature was reviewed relevant to special education alternative teacher preparation program participant turnover. At what rate have special education candidates dropped out before program completion? Why did these candidates drop out before program completion? A final literature gap identified was a deeper

exploration of special education alternative teacher preparation program design. If alternative pathways have become viable for special education teacher recruitment in rural school systems, specialized knowledge and preparation must be considered to equip participants to meet their job demands. The special education teacher turnover cycle has been perpetuated without specialized preparedness support. Considering these teachers' perceived job demands and job resources as rural special education teachers prepared through alternative certification pathways is relevant as a foundational component of this study's conceptual framework.

Job Demands-Resources Model

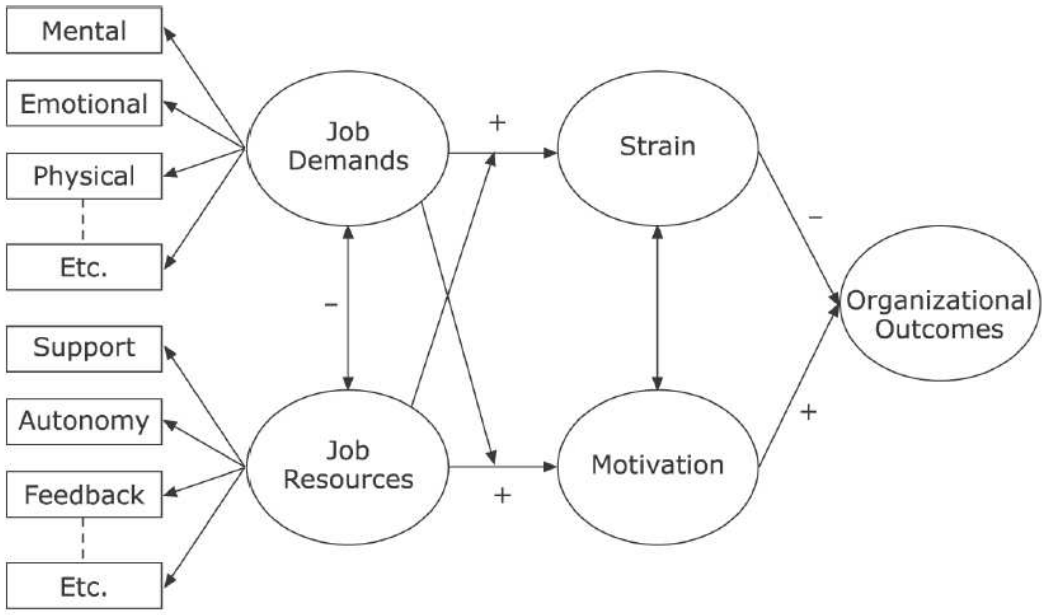
The literature contained numerous theories and models associated with employee burnout, job engagement, job motivation, and job satisfaction, with findings indicating job characteristics significantly impacted employee well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Many of these studies were based on Karasek's 1979 demand-control model and Siegrist's 1996 effort-reward balance model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Bakker and Demerouti (2007) argued these models were based on limited variables not applicable to all occupations and centered on negative outcomes, such as burnout. In their effort to incorporate numerous occupations and working conditions while emphasizing positive and negative employee outcomes, Bakker and Demerouti (2007) developed the job demands-resources model. Some burnout indicators cited by rural special education teachers are unchangeable, particularly those resulting from the special education teacher shortage. Viewing rural special education teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and practices resulting from their pursuit of an alternative certification pathway through the lens of the

job demands-resources model serves to inform school system administrators' support and retention efforts of these teachers.

The job demands-resources model purported every job has unique stress factors, including the physical, psychological, social, or organizational job aspects (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). These factors were divided into two categories: job demands and job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Job demands included the physical, psychological, social, or organizational job aspects requiring physical or psychological skills and effort (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Job resources included the physical, psychological, social, or organizational job aspects crucial to achieving work goals, reducing job demands, or stimulating employee growth (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Two additional components of the job demands-resources model included the health impairment process and motivation; these psychological processes developed job strain and job motivation (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The motivational process suggested job resources can be motivational and yield increased engagement, greater job satisfaction, and enhanced task performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Jansen et al., 2020; Granziera et al., 2022). The health impairment process ultimately contributed to burnout as job demands exhaust employees' mental and physical resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Jansen et al., 2020; Granziera, et al., 2022). Figure 2 visually represents Bakker and Demerouti's (2007) job demands-resources model.

Figure 2

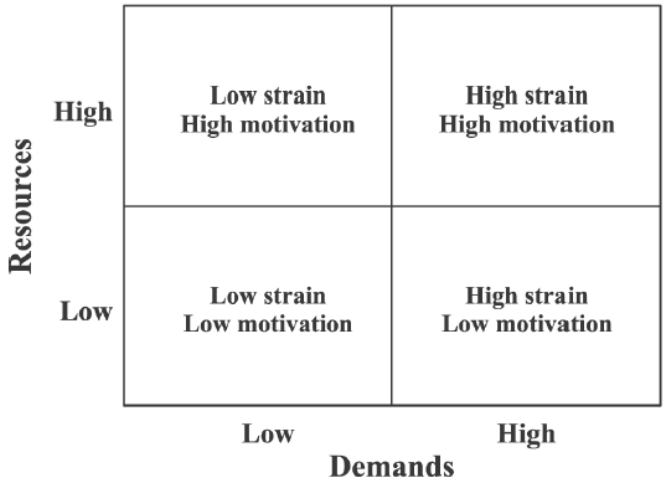
The Job Demands-Resources Model



The job-demands resources model includes two interacting processes – the buffering and boosting processes. The buffering process reflects how job resources can sometimes buffer or compensate for the negative impacts of job demands. Similarly, the boosting process reflects how some job resources can boost employee engagement when job demands are high (Granziera, et al., 2022). Strain and motivation developed when job demands and resources were high, and strain and motivation were absent when job demands and resources were low (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Figure 3 visually represents these interacting processes.

Figure 3

Buffering and Boosting Process of the Job Demands-Resource Model



It is critical to consider job resources and demands vary in content, setting, and person-to-person based on individual perceptions of accessible job resources and demands (Hakenen & Roodt, 2010). Prieto et al. (2008) noted teachers' perceived imbalance between their job demands and resources impacted their psychological well-being, contributing to burnout. Gilmour and Wehby (2020) utilized the job-demands resources model theoretical framework to examine special education teacher burnout. Through their multilevel logistic regression model analyses of a 3-year statewide dataset of teachers' teaching statuses, Gilmour and Wehby's (2020) use of the job-demands resources model suggested that teachers were more inclined to burn out when their job demands exceed their access to relevant physical, mental, and emotional resources. In their 5-year longitudinal study of 760 Finish special education teachers, Soini et al. (2019) also explored special education teacher burnout and the job-demands resources model through the lens of job fit or misfit. In both studies, teachers experienced less burnout when they felt confident meeting job demands (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Soini

et al., 2019). More recent research on teacher burnout highlighted the need for school administrators to consider support and attrition interventions for teachers in terms of job demands-resources profiles (Jansen et al., 2020; McCarthy et al., 2016).

Summary

As the special education teacher shortage has remained a nationwide concern, school leaders focused on understanding special education teacher burnout factors. Leaders embraced employing special education teachers who have chosen alternative teacher preparation pathways. Subsequently, leaders strengthened and intensified induction support. However, most program designs have been generally structured, creating a knowledge gap for special education program participants. School leaders have attempted to strengthen specialized knowledge and training support for special education program participants. However, have these efforts been sufficient to prevent the perpetual special education teacher burnout and turnover cycle? Do these teachers perceive they have the resources to meet the demands of their day-to-day job duties and responsibilities? A deeper exploration of the experiences of rural special education teachers who chose alternative preparation pathways is needed.

Chapter III

Methodology

The special education teacher shortage continues to plague rural school systems, negatively impacting these schools' ability to provide equitable services to eligible students in their least restrictive environment. It has become imperative for rural school administrators to understand the experiences of special education teachers who chose alternative preparation pathways, as this has become a viable recruitment vein for special education teachers. The goal of this study is to inform rural special education directors, curriculum directors, human resource directors, and principals of relevant information for supporting their special education teachers who chose alternative preparation pathways. It was imperative to hear the stories of rural special education teachers who chose alternative teacher preparation pathways to achieve this goal. Patton (2015) indicated that "the fundamental principle of qualitative interviewing is to provide a framework within which respondents can express their own understanding in their own terms" (p. 442). Qualitative methods were used and described throughout this chapter.

Research Design and Rationale

Qualitative inquiry "captures stories to understand people's perspectives and experiences" (Patton, 2015, p. 13). A phenomenological approach was appropriate for answering this study's research questions as "a phenomenological study focuses on the essence or structure of an experience" (Merriam & Griner, 2002, p. 7). Patton (2015) expanded this notion of participants' experiences to include "how they perceive it, describe it, feel

about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others" (p. 115). The epistemology guiding this study was constructivism, as "it suggests that each one's way of making sense of the world is as valid and worthy of respect as any other" (Patton, 2015, p. 122). The phenomenon focus of this study was the experiences of rural special education teachers who chose alternative preparation pathways. Bakker and Demerouti's (2007) job demands-resources model was a foundational component of this study's conceptual framework and lends to understanding these teachers' perceptions of their jobs' demands and resources. This knowledge will equip school administrators to provide intervention before potential burnout or attrition.

Seidman (2013) described interviewing as "a basic mode of inquiry" (p. 8). He further explained, "In-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2013, p. 9). Patton (2015) indicated that "the fundamental principle of qualitative interviewing is to provide a framework within which respondents can express their own understanding in their own terms" (p. 442). It was appropriate to use a combined interview format consisting of a standardized open-ended interview and an interview guide for this study. Standardized open-ended questions were critical to ensure all participants responded to questions focused on these concepts. By the nature of hearing their individual stories as they reconstruct their experiences and explore the meaning-making of those experiences, it was imperative to have the flexibility to incorporate additional questions as their responses aligned with the need for further clarification or deeper exploration. A Seidman (2013) style interview utilizing a three-interview series with each participant was appropriate to foster rich data.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of rural special education teachers who chose alternative preparation pathways through the following research questions derived from the research goals and contextual framework:

Research Question 1: How do individuals describe their experiences becoming rural special education teachers using alternative preparation as their certification pathway?

Research Question 2: What beliefs and attitudes resulted from using an alternative preparation as a pathway for certification purposes?

Research Question 3: What practices resulted from using an alternative preparation as a pathway for certification purposes?

Sites and Participants

This study's setting was rural school systems in Georgia, as the research questions focused on rural special education teachers who chose alternative preparation pathways. Maxwell (2013) noted purposeful selection lends to "achieving representativeness" relevant to the study (p. 98). Participants completed certification through one of Georgia's two approved alternative certification pathways. Participants were identified through direct communication with school superintendents and directors of regional partnering agencies serving rural school systems. An email and letter outlining the purpose and details of the study were provided to superintendents (See Appendix A); this information guided authorized personnel in identifying eligible teachers.

Seidman (2013) suggested sufficiency and saturation of information determine the number of study participants. Four to six participants were desirable for this study, and

four individuals meeting participant criteria consented to participate. Approval to communicate directly with potential candidates was obtained from superintendents or the authorized designee. An email and letter outlining the purpose and details of the study were provided to potential participants. The email and letter are included in Appendix A. The lists of potential participants received from authorizing school personnel included twelve individuals. Informed consent documentation was obtained from those choosing to participate. The nature of the proposed research questions did not necessitate emphasis on specific participant demographics. The selected study participants met the following priority criteria: hold only special education teacher certification, have taught in only one school system, and have exited an alternative preparation program within 1-5 years. The specific participant criteria associated with the study ensured the sample reflects the general population impacted by the study. Considering the setting and participants helped inform data-gathering techniques.

Data Collection

Each participant's interview was scheduled over three 90-minute sessions based on the interviewee's preference of location, date, and time. Interviews were held via Microsoft Teams at the request of the interviewees and were recorded using the online platform recording feature. Transcribing and researcher memoing were completed between each interview session; subsequent interviews were scheduled within one week. Researcher memoing allowed for reflection of potential biases.

Questions in the first interview focused on the participants' life history. Seidman (2013) highlighted the importance of asking participants to "tell as much as possible about him or herself in light of the topic up to the present time" (p. 21). Participants were

asked about their childhood, experiences in K-12 education, post-secondary experiences, and motivation for becoming a special education teacher. The second interview focused on the participants' experiences as part of their pursuit and completion of the alternative preparation pathway. The third and final interview posed questions to foster participants' reflection on the meaning of their experiences as rural special education teachers who chose alternative preparation pathways. The second and third interviews began with rephrased questions from the previous interview. This ensured the internal consistency of participants' responses. See Appendix B for the interview guide.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were generated through Microsoft Teams, however, recordings were reviewed multiple times to note nonverbal material and correct misinterpreted or misspelled words to develop a detailed and accurate transcript of each interview. MAXQDA was initially considered for organizing transcript data. However, it was determined manual coding allowed for a deeper analysis of individual transcripts to foster the identification of themes among the collective transcripts. Researcher memoing was conducted between interviews; however, analysis of transcripts began after all interviews were completed. Seidman (2013) cautioned premature analysis could "impose meaning from one participant's interviews onto the next" (p. 116). Analytic memos were necessary to guide and shape the analysis process, given the magnitude of the codifying and categorizing process. Saldaña (2016) suggested, "whenever anything related to and significant about the coding or analysis of data comes to mind, stop whatever you are doing and write a memo about it immediately" (p. 45). Descriptive coding was used to analyze all researcher memos. Saldaña (2016) likened descriptive coding to topic coding;

this was an appropriate technique as it aided in identifying categories and comparable contents.

In Vivo coding and concept coding were used to analyze all interview transcripts. In Vivo coding was an appropriate analysis technique as it focused on the participants' stories, which were the core of this study. Synonymous terms for concept coding include literal coding, verbatim coding, inductive coding, and natural coding (Saldaña (2016). Concept coding provided a lens for overarching ideas identified in the data as this process assigned a "word or short phrase that symbolically represents a suggested meaning broader than a single item or action" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 119). This was an iterative process involving recoding and recategorizing; code mapping assisted with the organization for clarity. The generated codes were categorized. This aided in categorically theming the data. Reflection on the research questions throughout the coding, categorizing, and theming processes ensured alignment and connectivity to answer the intended research questions. It was also critical to consider potential validity and ethical issues.

Validity and Ethical Issues

Kim (2016) highlighted the conscious process of reflexivity at all phases to stay mindful of the role of the researcher in the study. Setting the stage for collecting rich data reduced plausible threats. It was imperative to include member checks routinely, given the focus on participants' meaning-making. This was an intentional process allowing participants to review the transcripts, designation of codes, categories, themes, and associated narratives. This allowed for the correction of possible misinterpretations of participants' responses. The framing of the research questions ensured the focus remained

on hearing the participants' stories to avoid validity concerns. Researcher memoing allowed for reflection of potential biases.

This was a minimal-risk research study with no more risks than participants were likely to encounter in everyday activities. This study was exempt from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight. See Appendix D for the IRB Exemption Report. Participants were provided in writing with descriptive details of the study's procedures, a reiteration of voluntary participation, and a written statement of the ability to withdraw from study participation at any time. Researcher contact information was provided should participants have had questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the study. Informed, signed consent was obtained from all participants. See Appendix C for the informed consent form.

Summary

The research design for this study was built upon the established conceptual framework to effectively answer the research questions. The phenomenological approach using Seidman's (2013) three-interview series lent to hearing the participants' experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and practices as rural special education teachers who chose alternative preparation pathways. Information obtained from this study would foster improvement in rural school systems' teacher support practices to increase retention of special education teachers who choose alternative preparation pathways. Chapter IV includes narrative profiles of the study's participants.

Chapter IV

Participants

Seidman (2013) suggested the researcher's task is to convey the interviewees' experiences to a level that readers "deepen their understanding of the issues it reflects" (p. 54). As aligned to answering the research questions, the study participants were purposefully selected based on the following criteria:

1. Currently employed as a special education teacher in a Georgia rural school system.
2. Obtained special educator teacher certification through one of Georgia's two approved alternative certification pathways within the last 5 years.
3. Taught in only one school system.

Seidman (2013) suggested numerous ways to share interview data; however, developing participant profiles aligns with the interviewing process. Seidman further noted narrative profiles "allow us to present the participant in context, to clarify his or her intentions, and to convey a sense of process and time, all central components of qualitative analysis" (p. 122). Interview transcripts and member checking were used to develop the following participant profiles. Pseudonyms were used to protect each participant's identity.

David

A pseudonym was used to protect the participant's identity. David grew up in North Georgia, where his father, a dentist, and his mother, a special education paraprofessional, raised him in a quaint rural community. The product

of a public school system education, David reflected on the “Friday night lights” as some of his most memorable moments. While reminiscing about his rural schooling experiences, David emphasized how the size of the school fostered the capacity to “form relationships over time and really just lifelong bonds with people.” The Friday night lights symbolized high school football games where “just everybody in the town would come out there, everyone from all walks of life and various backgrounds, and just kind of congregated together” becoming a unifying community affair.

College life took David away from small-town living for a bit. He studied political science at the University of North Georgia with intentions of later going to law school. He had varying work experiences in college such as lifeguarding, UPS delivery during holidays, and internship with the county misdemeanor probation department. In 2019, David and his family had some unforeseen life circumstances unfold, resulting in him taking some time off after completing his undergraduate degree. Simultaneously, the pandemic hit, changing the landscape for seeking employment. With encouragement from his mother after a grueling nine-month stretch of no employment opportunities, David began substituting in the school system. In reflection, David saw this as an opportunity to “get his feet wet” and “learn and gain perspective about things.” In April 2022, David landed a long-term substitute role as a special education teacher, something he later noted to be impactful in his decision to pursue a permanent special education teacher role.

This opportunity to substitute in a therapeutic classroom for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities prompted David to consider a long-term commitment to working with special education. David reverently spoke of his parents’

influence as he considered the leap to pursue a different career path and emphasized, "What really had me circling back to it was both my parents were in service jobs where they were providing to people." Of equal influence was his recognition of the personal traumas experienced by the students with whom he worked and the realization of his relatability given the unforeseen circumstances his family had recently faced. David noted, "I'm not saying I put myself in their shoes per se, but I could definitely see how their schooling was, you know, sort of messed up here with that and life in general." In time, his next steps were apparent when the administration presented the scenario for him to assume the role of the teacher of record by going through the Georgia Teacher Academy for Preparation and Pedagogy (GaTAPP) program.

As he weighed his options for pursuing a permanent role as a special education teacher, David recognized he could not progress in isolation. Testimonials from teachers who went through GaTAPP served to reassure this was the best route for him to pursue. His subbing experience, where he learned the criticalness and challenge to "meet the student at their level," was his only special education experience. He certainly benefited from his mother's special education knowledge, which helped build his knowledge base. However, David quickly learned he had to rely on others, "trying to be a sponge," and glean information from as many reliable sources as possible. The juggling act ensued, figuring out how to manage personal life while simultaneously being a student and special education teacher. David described his life as a "fluid situation" during this time.

> I started getting to school earlier, and I would do my work here in the mornings, or as much as I could, and then go about the school day. Then, I would reserve time at home, too. So, I just had to make sure that I was able to get my schedule

aligned with the school schedule and then with the GaTAPP program schedule, too.

Although his first days in the classroom as the teacher of record involved a "learning curve," David's subbing stint was to his advantage because he had already established a rapport with the students. His class structure included a paraprofessional, leading to overseeing and working closely with other adults. He encountered the challenges of differing philosophies in approaches to working with students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. How to maneuver such conversations was an area he found himself drawing upon his previous work and life experiences. David readily admitted he did not have a "great understanding at all" of special education laws as he assumed the role of special education teacher and, transparently, was unprepared for this aspect of the role. David noted he appreciated the GaTAPP program provided workshops and active learning opportunities, with a mock IEP scenario as his most notable special education-specific task. From a general instructional standpoint, the coursework and assignments he completed related to depth of knowledge have proven beneficial in his day-to-day work with students.

Human support was critical for David and it ensured he had "somebody to bounce things off of." Posing somewhat of a challenge, his program-assigned mentor worked in a neighboring county. Despite the distance and variance in local procedures, David capitalized on the situation as an opportunity to glean from varied insights and perspectives. An on-site therapeutic program lead teacher filled the gap and was readily available to answer questions as needed. Observation feedback was a valuable resource for David as he progressed through the GaTAPP program. With advice coming from

multiple sources, such as GaTAPP staff and school administrators, he collectively viewed their feedback in hopes of attaining a fuller picture of how they perceived him as a special education teacher. Of all the support components David experienced during his GaTAPP enrollment, and even since then, collaboration and communication with his colleagues and special education lead staff have proven to be the most valuable resources for him as a special education teacher.

Not everyone in David's GaTAPP cohort completed the program. He was aware of individuals who "had issues with students" or "thought it sounded good, and then it did not work out for them." David credited his substitute teaching experience as a critical indicator for him and recommended anyone considering becoming a special education teacher first serve as a substitute teacher to better understand what the role entails.

David posed a disclaimer about who he would recommend as a special educator by suggesting someone who "first and foremost cares for somebody more than specifically themselves." He cautioned how selfish mindsets will not be fulfilled in this profession. David's descriptors for how he perceives his role as a special educator included a positive voice, consistency, and follow-through.

> I think the role is primarily to be a positive voice for many of these students who may not get that elsewhere. Consistency is another thing. Being there when you say you're going to be there and following through with what you say you're going to do.

Linda

A pseudonym was used to protect the participant's identity. Linda and her three siblings were raised in a Christian home by their mom and dad. When she was 13, Linda's family moved to a rural community in North Georgia for her father's

enrollment at a nearby college. Linda attended a rural public school through 3rd grade until her mother began homeschooling. From the collective memories of her childhood, Linda meekly recalled the time she got in trouble in kindergarten for something her friend had done; however, she exuberantly reminisced on the homeschooling group experiences at the college her father attended.

Her family made other moves over the next several years, but after graduating from high school, Linda returned to the rural area to attend the same college where her father previously taught. With a career goal to be a school counselor or a counselor for pregnant teens, Linda obtained a counseling degree. Her intentions to minor in teaching ultimately shifted to a minor in history instead. After a move to live with her parents for a year after college, Linda eventually returned to a rural community in Georgia, where she began working at a daycare center. The return to the rural area brought the benefit of a less crowded community with an "everybody knows everybody type of feel." She could not escape her desire to work with children and expressed, "I have always, always, always loved kids. Young kids have always been my heart." With some persuasion from her best friend, a special education teacher, Linda landed a role as a special education paraprofessional, filling a vacancy in her friend's class.

The opportunity to work in the school system was great timing since her daughter was getting ready to enter PreK, aligning her work schedule with her daughter's school schedule. It was not long before the special education classroom experience captured Linda's heart, heightening her passion for working with children. This passion was evident to the school principal, who gave Linda the opportunity to enroll in the GaTAPP program and assume a special education teacher role. As a single working mom of a 10-

year-old daughter and, admittedly, “no desire to go back to school,” Linda saw the GaTAPP option as a win-win situation.

> With the GaTAPP program, I was able to work full time as a teacher, receive the teacher pay, get the teaching experience as well as take all the classes within a timely manner. That did not affect being a mother.

With approximately 6 years of paraprofessional experience with a teacher who recognized Linda’s passion and capability for working with students with disabilities, Linda assumed the teaching role with some teaching insights and special education knowledge. Those first days as a special education teacher “felt a tad crazy at times,” adjusting to working with PreK and kindergarten as well as providing coteaching and small group services. Working with the students, however, was what was most comfortable going through this process. “Teaching them, learning with them, sitting with them, exploring with them, learning how they learn. That just came naturally,” stated Linda. Ongoing collaboration and frequent meetings with the school-site mentor proved beneficial, particularly for talking through issues and providing thorough explanations for processes and procedures.

Despite the mixture of teachers’ assigned roles in the GaTAPP cohort, such as elementary, high school, ESOL, and gifted, “a good amount of special education” information was incorporated into the program courses, although “mostly geared towards older children.” Course assignments and tasks were transferrable to her day-to-day work. From her lens of working with the youngest population of students, Linda suggested grouping cohorts by age levels or grade bands could provide program participants with more “in-depth” preparation for working with the students in their classrooms.

Flexibility and support from the GaTAPP program staff and school administrators alike were reassuring for Linda. She noted, “It was not easy, but it was easy to manage. They were really, really good about working with us.” Maintaining her confidence throughout the program that she “could do it” while managing being a single mom was perhaps her greatest challenge. She noted, “And while it wasn’t hard, there were days where I was just like, I just can’t. Why am I even trying this type of thing?” With the school-level special education team leader at the helm, Linda credited her “amazing” special education team of colleagues, her “SPED community,” as the greatest support and resource for her as a special education teacher through the GaTAPP process and beyond. Not everyone in Linda’s GaTAPP cohort experienced the same level of school community support as she did, but she recognized, “The more support you have from upper administration, from other teachers in that building, the better they’re going to learn and they’re going to progress.” The “let’s figure it out” mindset her administrators and special education colleagues exhibited provided reassurance she would never lack what she needed to succeed in her teaching role.

After thoughtful consideration, Linda described her role as a special education teacher as leading and guiding students on their path to success and enabling them to function in a general education classroom “so that they learn they can.” Of all the readily identifiable challenges, Linda quietly noted her greatest challenge is other teachers’ views of her students and stated, “They don’t see that just because the child is different doesn’t mean they can’t.” In recognizing teaching students with disabilities is her passion and genuinely comes from her heart, she acknowledged not just anyone should be a special education teacher.

> You can tell who those people are. It's not for them. They don't enjoy it as much. If your heart isn't in it, you're not going to make the progress that you need to make in your classroom and with your children.

Reflecting on her experiences in the GaTAPP program, Linda noted the benefits she experienced and explained, "You get hands-on knowledge with it, you learn it, and you implement it immediately. You're going to hear it, and then you're going to do it, and that's going to cement it in your mind."

Danielle

A pseudonym was used to protect the participant's identity. Danielle lived the life of an only child with her parents in a rural Georgia community until the arrival of her baby brother when she was 10 years old. Family gatherings were important to her close-knit family. Her parents each had five siblings, so family get-togethers were like grand reunions. Being a car rider and getting screened for speech services were notable memories of her elementary public-school years. However, her middle school years did not hold as fond a memory for the most part as she described, "You can tell everybody is so different. You know, people have a tendency to bully a little bit more in middle school." The transition to high school included a different type of "trauma" where her mother was the physical education teacher, and no one wanted to be friends with "the teacher's kid." However, once she made the adjustment to her mother being at the same school, she began experiencing the best years of her public schooling with activities such as Beta Club, student council, chorus, and sports. Academics were also a priority; Danielle hung out with people she considered to be "extremely intelligent" and pushed herself beyond her comfort zone in Advanced Placement courses.

Her graduating class prided themselves on initiating change and challenging the status quo with Danielle often leading the cause.

> There was a time in smaller, rural areas when we still had two homecoming queens. So, you know, my class took it upon ourselves to initiate the conversation of why we are having two and separating them by race. That's not cool.

Not only were her high school years evidence of "everything she worked for coming to fruition," but she experienced impactful events critical to her post-secondary pursuits and career path in occupational therapy. The profound influence of teachers on her life implanted an early desire to teach. After seeing a guest speaker in her high school anatomy class demonstrate equipment used by patients recovering from stroke and other physically limiting issues, her interest and consideration of occupational therapy was sparked, and she expressed, "I was like, that is so wonderful. I think I could do that. I think I can be a help to someone." Thus, the decision to pursue occupational therapy ensued.

With an innovative director who allowed Danielle the autonomy to pick up various contracts, Danielle provided occupational therapy in nursing homes, outpatient care, inpatient care, and schools throughout her career. The genetic condition that had plagued Danielle with recurring health issues and seizure-like episodes over the course of several years brought her to a crossroads; the physically taxing therapy sessions with patients were taking a toll on her body, and "something had to give."

> I've either got to go on disability or have got to find another career because I just can't keep up with this pace and raise my kids. I can't do all of this. My body

can't handle anymore, and I don't want to be in a wheelchair anytime soon. I'm not old enough for this, right?

While sharing her plight with the special education director at a school where she provided occupational therapy services, she learned there was an opportunity to become a special education teacher. Working with students with disabilities was not daunting for Danielle; she had extensive experience providing therapy services to individuals with various disabilities and had some general knowledge of special education law and related paperwork. The opportunity to work in a rural school system where she had provided services for years was enticing since "it was just like being at home." The smallness of the school system provided a level of comfort to more easily glean from others "the tricks of the trade" while entering a new career field. For as long as she could remember, she had wanted to be a teacher, having been surrounded by teachers her whole life. Here was the opportunity. With some research and guidance from the special education director, Danielle determined the GaTAPP program was the best way to obtain her special education certification and noted, "The GaTAPP route is a little bit faster and more convenient. It was just easier to go that route, get my feet wet, work, and go to school at the same time."

Despite the familiarity with the school, staff, and students, Danielle found herself in the unique position of "teaching all at the same time as learning how to teach." The administration and GaTAPP staff had emphasized teaching procedures first, an approach comfortable for Danielle. This provided some reprieve with the academic component, which she was more apprehensive in tackling in those first days. The GaTAPP cohort contained general education and special education candidates, where the bulk of the

content focused on the general education population. While working full-time and attempting to adapt the information and course tasks to her K-2 self-contained special education classroom, juggling assignments was her greatest challenge.

Classroom management and behavior strategies topics were some of the most impactful GaTAPP program components for Danielle; as these pieces were presented, she could immediately go back and apply them in her classroom. The instructional components of GaTAPP, including unpacking the standards, phonics, and math focus, were beneficial but not completely transferrable information for her classroom structure. Although this content informed her general instructional knowledge and placed her "ahead of the curve" as this same information was discussed and implemented on a school-wide level, she suggested GaTAPP staff plan lessons and tasks to consider the applicability to self-contained special education settings by stating, "Make sure you understand what it is that our classroom environments look like so that you can understand why that's not even going to work in our classes." As with any program, there were "boxes to check" through the GaTAPP process. Danielle benefited from the support provided through the GaTAPP program, helping her "check the boxes," answer questions, and encouraging her throughout the process. Given her experience with the GaTAPP personnel support, Danielle encouraged her school administration to follow suit and provide mentors at the school level as well by suggesting, "Definitely make sure that person has a mentor at the school level because they are going to need it to get through. Check on them. Don't just leave them and the mentor out there."

When considering her role as a special education teacher, Danielle stipulated one must first "love this job." Guiding students to access the content and information was just

the beginning of her role; she then worked to apply the information to real-world scenarios for her students. She found herself returning to the process of unpacking the standards because it was such an asset to understanding instruction. She noted, "Once you get that piece of it, then everything else is so easy. You have to understand the 'why.'" Reiterating the importance of mentors, Danielle noted the importance of "having a person to ensure, especially as a new teacher, I got the 'why' right."

Given their age and their level of needs, her students required extensive adult assistance. With only herself and one paraprofessional to support 16 students, her creativity was limited by stating, "I don't have enough hands to do what I want to do in my brain." As such, she identified her greatest challenge and frustration as a special education teacher as limited available staff impacting her effectiveness in the classroom. Despite these challenges, she identified the reward "to have students that people or society say can't do and have them do, and to know you had a hand in it," as far more significant.

Holly

A pseudonym was used to protect the participant's identity. Holly grew up in a rural South Georgia community during the late 1980s and 1990s. Since her parents were divorced, she spent the weekdays with her mother and every other weekend with her father. Her elementary schooling was at a private school with phonics instruction using *Hooked on Phonics* as a notable memory. Middle school and high school memories in the public school system included cheerleading, homecoming court, FFA sweetheart, and an interest-sparking experience on the journalism staff.

After graduating high school, Holly attended a junior college where her previous journalism interest was expanded through a work-study assignment with the public relations director. From there, she attended a university in the southern region of Georgia, where she majored in speech communication with an emphasis in public relations. As she progressed in her studies at the university, Holly realized how different it was to attend a rural public and private school.

> We certainly didn't have access to everything that people did in the cities and things like that. We did not have exposure to what maybe my roommates who were from the Atlanta area had exposure to that I had not. Really, in my graduate program, is where I felt the sting, seeing kind of how at a loss I still was. I felt like I did a lot of catch-up academically.

With her communications degree in tow, Holly worked as a corporate writer and editor, serving on creative teams with graphic designers and writing content for search engine optimization for 15 years. Along the way, she served as an adjunct communications instructor: "So I always had an interest in teaching, and that's kind of the way I kept that going was to be an adjunct." At one point, Holly was accepted to Teach for America and was assigned to special education. Simultaneously, she was offered a corporate job with the Boys and Girls Clubs of America and accepted their job opportunity instead.

Eventually, life brought Holly back to her rural roots. Despite encountering a bleak job market, it became apparent she "could actually make a living as a teacher," in this rural community. This was a refreshing realization since she could not consider a teaching job in the city due to the discrepant salary and cost of living. Subsequently, Holly took a position as a special education teacher with a provisional, non-renewable

teaching certificate, allowing her one year to determine which route to pursue complete, renewable certification. Holly's friend, who had completed the GaTAPP program, and her school administrators suggested GaTAPP as a viable route for Holly, particularly since she already had a master's degree in another field. Although the decision to commit to the GaTAPP program was a fairly easy one, Holly taught for a full year before she was able to begin the program. Faced with the job duties and responsibilities without adept training, Holly recognized she needed to fill the gaps in her knowledge.

> I just immersed myself in whatever I could find. If it meant joining a Facebook group, I was on a Facebook group. If it meant getting a Pinterest board, and if it meant really leaning heavily on my teaching mentor about what it was I needed to do, because, I'll be honest, I just really didn't have a lot of prior knowledge.

During this time, Holly worked with students with emotional and behavioral disabilities in a special education class setting. Good-heartedly, Holly noted, "They threw somebody that had no idea what they were doing right into the deep end." The first days in the classroom were overwhelming and hectic but rewarding.

> I felt very energized. I think for the first time in my career, I felt wanted and needed. I truly felt appreciated. I learned so much from it. I didn't just learn the ins and outs of teaching; I learned about me. That was probably the biggest lesson that I walked away with, like where my thresholds were and where I felt like I was most effective.

As she entered GaTAPP and started her second year of teaching, Holly shifted to serving as a special education co-teacher, widening her range of disability focus to better understand intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, other health impairments, and

autism. A balancing act ensued “to keep the wheels” on her personal life while meeting the daily demands of her teaching role and completing a demanding preparation program.

The GaTAPP cohort was comprised of approximately 50 participants, predominantly general education candidates in various teaching roles and nearly 10 special education candidates. This particular year, the local GaTAPP program partnered with the regional Georgia Learning Resources System (GLRS) for special education-specific courses and training for special education teacher candidates. This proved to be most impactful and beneficial to Holly as it was “top-notch” and “paid off in dividends because it taught the rationale on how to write an IEP” and other critical special education components, putting “everything into perspective” concerning special education. Other than this component of the program, the coursework and assignments were “very much tailored to a general education audience” and “was not very pertinent for special education teachers,” feeling “like busy work.” This partnership for special education-specific training only lasted one year and was not renewed for subsequent GaTAPP cohorts.

Seeking what was readily applicable to her daily work, Holly found the behavior management component of GaTAPP to be very informative and helpful.

> They did a really excellent job, and that was very pertinent to me, especially as a little bitties teacher. I went from teaching college students where in college, they just give you the book, and you’re an expert in your field. So you’re expected to know how to teach it. And that is certainly not the case to go down to little bitties and to understand the behavior management piece was so important. Because if you can’t get that behavior under control, then you can’t teach.

Additionally, her capstone project was helpful for putting the curriculum components into perspective: “This is how the standards line up with the curriculum, and this is how the curriculum should inform the way you think about collecting data and teaching.” Recognizing her laser focus on special education, Holly appreciated the GaTAPP program contents overall but found herself “all tuned in once they started speaking the SPED language and how those things applied in the general curriculum.”

In the year before entering GaTAPP and once in the program, Holly had “an amazing teacher mentor” who provided direct guidance and support for all special education tasks and ultimately ensured compliance factors were met. Additionally, district and school administrators were supportive of Holly pursuing outside training. Holly noted professional learning opportunities and support were readily available, and she firmly believes “you’ve got to be willing to go out and get it on your own.” Having an administration that valued teachers’ pursuit of continued professional development was reassuring to Holly.

In the midst of her GaTAPP program, Holly experienced a personal trauma, heightening the challenge of separating and balancing personal life, work, and program completion. In reflection, Holly considered how this impacted her as a student and was upset to acknowledge there may have been times she was not able to make the assignments and tasks a priority.

> There was always something that needed to be done because there was always a box to check or something I needed to do, and at that time in my life, I was just literally whatever I could get done, that’s what I got done. If it wasn’t enough, so be it.

Her mentor, colleagues, and district special education department provided tremendous support during this time. However, Holly felt her school-level administration "really fell down." What should have been support was instead "checking boxes of what they had to do." Meetings with her administration consisted of them citing "what they had done" and referencing conversations of guidance and support from Holly's recollection that did not exist. Holly noted these experiences "tainted" her view of the program. It was as if her administration had given up on her. Subsequently, she decided to "roll with the punches" because these were her direct supervisors, and she felt she had no other course of action. Despite the lack of school administration support, Holly successfully completed the GaTAPP program. Given her experiences, Holly suggested more transparency from administrators was needed while she was going through GaTAPP. She recommended administrators assign someone to "truly help" teachers and routinely check in with them.

As she reflected on her role as a special education teacher, Holly described teaching as a "labor of love," understanding "all students have the capacity to learn, and it is the job of the teacher to help guide that process." Holly suggested it does not end there by stating, "You become a lot more at times. You also become a confidant for students." Understanding her impact on students, Holly confessed she struggled with identifying how she was most useful to them in the classroom, particularly those most difficult to reach. After considering her resources and support, Holly suggested, "It's just a matter of finding time and knowing how to pull those resources together efficiently." Holly noted the importance of a strong administration at the board level to establish the support system infrastructure. She suspected her building administration had a "lack of

understanding for special education and special education needs," given her experience. Despite this, she encouraged a colleague to become a special education teacher, citing the "opportunities to make really big impacts on students." Holly suggested only those passionate about working with students should consider a shift to serving as special education teachers.

Summary

This study's purpose was to hear the stories of rural special education teachers who chose alternative preparation as a pathway for certification. The interviewing process through which the data was generated prompted participants to select, reconstruct, and describe their experiences, simultaneously imparting meaning to them (Seidman, 2013). The preceding profiles captured the participants' experiences in their own words. The results of this study are reported in Chapter V.

Chapter V

Results

Decreased teacher preparation program enrollment and increased turnover rates have perpetuated the special education teacher shortages (Espinoza et al., 2018). Alternative teacher preparation programs were developed to solve teacher shortages as these programs accelerate candidates' classroom entry (Bruno et al., 2018; Whitford et al., 2017). Purposeful sampling was used to identify four study participants who met the following criteria: completed an alternative teacher preparation program, hold only special education teacher certification, and have been teaching for less than 5 years in a rural school system in Georgia. This study explored the experiences of those rural special education teachers who pursued alternative teacher preparation pathways. The following research questions were answered in this study:

Research Question 1: How do individuals describe their experiences becoming rural special education teachers using alternative preparation as their certification pathway?

Research Question 2: What beliefs and attitudes resulted from using an alternative preparation as a pathway for certification purposes?

Research Question 3: What practices resulted from using an alternative preparation as a pathway for certification purposes?

Two participants were selected from rural north Georgia and two from rural south Georgia representing varied experiences. The Informed Consent document was provided and signed prior to the scheduling of the first interview, and verbal informed consent was obtained prior to beginning each subsequent interview. Participants' alternative pathway methods, MAT or GaTAPP, were identified during the first interview. All four voluntary participants noted they completed the GaTAPP program in their respective regions, two in the same northern regional agency and two in the same southern regional agency. All four participants were employed in different rural school systems. Table 1 provides participants' demographic information with a corresponding pseudonym for anonymity.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Age Range	Region	College Degree	Years Post GaTAPP
David	25-30	North Georgia	Political Science	2
Linda	35-40	North Georgia	Counseling	1
Danielle	40-45	South Georgia	Occupational Therapy	1
Holly	40-45	South Georgia	Communications	2

Each participant was interviewed virtually on three separate occasions over three months. This Seidman-style interview series included standardized open-ended questions to gain an understanding of answering the identified research questions (Maxwell, 2013). Microsoft Teams recording features aided in developing detailed transcriptions. Member checking was conducted through participants' review of completed transcripts and descriptive narratives to ensure validity.

Discussion of Themes

An iterative process of coding, recoding, categorizing, and recategorizing was used to analyze interview transcripts and researcher memos. Google Sheets with color coding were used to organize and update codes and categories throughout the process. In Vivo coding of transcripts reinforced prioritizing participants' words (Saldaña, 2016). Simultaneously, strong statements made by participants as interpreted by the researcher were highlighted. The In Vivo codes and highlighted statements were organized into preliminary categories. Researcher memos were coded with descriptive codes and added to the relevant categories. Transcripts were then coded using concept codes to identify the broader meaning of participants' statements. These concept codes revealed the need for recategorizing, resulting in the list of 14 categories being reduced to 10 categories. The analytical memoing process continued and generated questions requiring repeated review of transcripts to clarify code meanings, prompting recategorizing and identifying subcategories. Pattern coding was used in the second coding cycle to identify emergent explanations and themes in the first cycle of coding (Saldaña, 2016). Code charting was used to aid in transitioning to a conceptual analysis level (Saldaña, 2016). Five recurring themes emerged by winnowing the data through the lens of the research questions and conceptual framework: Motivation, GaTAPP Experiences, Challenges, Resources, and Improvements to Strengthen Alternative Program. Table 2 outlines each theme, subcategories, and sample supporting data.

Table 2

Theme, Subcategories, and Supporting Sample Data

Theme	Subcategory	Supporting Sample Data
Motivation	Career Change	"I had some unforeseen circumstances that unfolded in my life and my families' lives."
	GaTAPP	"I had no desire to go back to school."
GaTAPP Experiences	Program	"It was not easy, but it was easy to manage."
	School	"It probably took a good month to get into the full routine."
Challenges	Personal	"My greatest challenge was how to keep the wheels on my personal life going."
	Professional	"I was teaching all at the same time I was learning how to teach."
Resources	Material	"Somebody's going to work with me to get what I need to succeed."
	Collaboration/Collegial Support	"We know we can go to each other with anything, any questions, and we'll figure it out together."
Improvements to Strengthen Alternative Program	Program	"Definitely make sure it can be tailored for a class like mine."
	School	"Check on them. Don't just leave them and the mentor out there."
	Career Changers	"It's not a job I would recommend for anybody that has any selfish mindsets behind anything they do."

The next section explores each theme and corresponding subcategories in detail to answer the research questions.

Motivation

Data from the Georgia Insights Educator Pipeline Dashboard (2024) indicated 418 individuals from P-20 Regions across Georgia were enrolled in non-traditional special education certification pathways in 2023, an increase from 346 enrollees in 2022. Comparatively, 547 individuals from those same regions across Georgia were enrolled in traditional special education certification pathways, a substantial decrease from 1,231 enrollees in 2022. To pursue a non-traditional certification or alternative preparation pathway, the individual holds, at minimum, a four-year degree from an accredited university (GaPSC, 2023). The four study participants all held degrees in areas other than education, including political science (David), counseling (Lindsey), occupational therapy (Danielle), and speech communications (Holly). David nor Lindsey held jobs with their initial degree focus; however, Danielle and Holly worked numerous years in the fields related to their initial career path.

Despite their varied backgrounds, all four participants experienced significant life events, changing their initial career trajectory. Although they had very different experiences, these personal events motivated them to pursue other fields. With original aspirations to be a lawyer, David shared “unforeseen circumstances” impacted him and his family, delayed his college graduation, and resulted in him taking “some time off.” After graduating with her counseling degree, Linda “moved home for a year” to be with her parents. Danielle’s progressive medical condition began interfering with the physical demands of her role as an occupational therapist. Holly moved from the city to be closer to her home roots. Each event impacted the trajectory of their lives and initiated their exploration beyond their current paths or careers.

Although David did not share details and remained reserved when speaking of the "unforeseen circumstances" he and his family faced while working on his political science degree, this event spurred his eventual pursuit of the special education field. This life event shifted his focus away from law school. His mother's knowledge of and connection with the school system initiated temporary work substitute teaching to fill the gap in the bleak job market he faced. This phase of temporary work prompted reflection on what to do in the long term. David referenced his parents' service-oriented jobs and his newly identified desire for service-oriented work in each of the three interviews. The school's need for a long-term substitute aligning with his need for work was a matter of timing. However, David credited it to more than mere timing and convenience. David's unforeseen life event impacted his original career path, and his desire for service-oriented work motivated him to pursue the special education field. David began the second interview with reflections on his move to the special education field.

> I'd like to add. I feel like this is sort of a feeling that's developed over time. It started before I came in [to the school system] as well, but it really began to fester and become more obvious that I should have taken this path, maybe sooner, because once you're removed from a community for so long, and then you jump back in, you realize how much you really missed that type of environment.

Like David, Linda never pursued her original career path after completing her initial degree in counseling. She did have goals of serving as a school counselor or pregnant teens counselor, but moving out of state to be with her parents after she graduated college altered her career path. However, the notion of teaching was not foreign to Linda. While in college, she considered a minor in teaching, and she took a job

at a daycare while living out of state with her parents after college graduation. Linda eventually returned to Georgia and continued in the work to which she was now accustomed…daycare. Her best friend, a special education teacher, eventually encouraged Linda, now a mother, to consider filling a paraprofessional vacancy in the school system. Linda served as a special education paraprofessional for multiple years, but being a single mother heightened the financial need to consider a role beyond paraprofessional. The timing of a special education teaching vacancy in her school and the need to increase her finances aligned, serving as her motivation for pursuing a special education teacher role. However, Linda noted it was more than timing and stated, "It's where I felt led to go. That's just where my heart's been."

Unlike David and Linda, Danielle served as an occupational therapist, her original career path, for over 10 years. Danielle, though, was born with a genetic condition drastically impacting her potassium levels and resulted in various physical symptoms throughout her life. She noted the progression as she got older.

> So, as I've gotten older, I could probably have an episode sometime and not even know it. I got so weak. I was doing home health, and there's lifting, and there's a lot that requires my muscles to be working all day. Even though I was making my own schedule, it was just too taxing. I had already gone to several appointments, and I said, you know, something's gotta give. I said I've either got to go on disability or have got to find another career.

Faced with this life-altering decision, Danielle explored her options. Providing therapy in school systems gave her insights into the special education field and connected her with individuals who could answer questions about job options. The timing of a special

education teaching vacancy in a school system she served and the critical timing of her need for change to a less physically demanding job aligned. For Danielle, it was more than timing. She was raised by a family of educators and noted, “The only other thing I have ever wanted to do since I was little was teach.” Knowing she had to change career paths because of her debilitating muscles and realizing she had the opportunity to fulfill her childhood dream of being a teacher motivated Danielle to pursue the special education field.

Like Danielle, Holly worked in her original career path for 15 years before being motivated to change careers. Initially appeasing her long-standing interest in teaching, Holly was an adjunct instructor along with her corporate work. Living in an urban area precipitated the financial need to maintain a corporate-level job. Although she enjoyed her creative corporate work, personal life events brought her back to her rural hometown, where job opportunities were limited. Holly had previously explored the special education field through Teach for America. However, back in rural South Georgia, she realized she could afford to work as a teacher, heightening her motivation to pursue the special education field. Simultaneously, she recognized the number of special education teacher vacancies regionally. The feasibility of earning a living as a teacher and the evident teaching vacancies aligned, prompting Holly to determine, “This is the route that I’m going to go.”

Not only was the theme of motivation to pursue a career change prominent among the participants, but so was the theme of motivation to pursue the GaTAPP program specifically as opposed to pursuing a master's degree as an alternate route to special education certification. All participants noted their methods for acquiring information

about the GaTAPP program, including school administrators sharing information with them directly, speaking with teachers who completed the program, and personal research. All participants noted their reasons for pursuing the GaTAPP program and the influence others had on this decision. Their life responsibilities and needs were prominent reasons for their motivation to choose this route.

Through his work as a long-term substitute, David learned about the GaTAPP program and spoke to teachers who had completed the program and noted of those teachers, “They didn’t have any concerns about the program. They felt like they got what they needed, so I just went that route, and it worked out.” Linda, Danielle, and Holly articulated additional reasons behind their decisions to pursue the GaTAPP program. When asked why she chose to pursue the GaTAPP program, Linda immediately responded, “I had no desire to go back to school” followed with a more in-depth explanation as to why going “back to school” was not ideal for her.

> At the time I was, and I still am, a single mom. I had a 10-year-old daughter. I had to work full time to support us, so I couldn’t take time off to focus solely on going back to college or going to school and to be able to balance it. With that program, I was able to work full time as a teacher, receive the teacher pay, get the teaching experience, as well as take all the classes in a timely manner. That did not affect being a mother.

Danielle noted similar reasons.

> The GaTAPP route is a little bit faster and more convenient. It’s just right there. It was just easier. I felt like to go that route to be able to get my feet in, you know, to be able to work, and go to school. Do everything at the same time.

Holly gathered information from a friend who had completed the GaTAPP program and information from her administrator and determined this program was the best route for her primarily because she already held a master's degree and concluded, "So, nobody felt like it was worth getting a second master's degree."

Despite their range of differences including backgrounds, original career pursuits, life circumstances, and regional locations, all participants encountered a life-altering event leading to their entry into the special education field. Once the decision was made to move into the special education field, the participants faced alternative preparation pathway options to move beyond their temporary teacher certification status. Once more, despite their range of differences, the participants pursued the same route, the GaTAPP program, and shared commonalities of motivating reasons to pursue this route as opposed to other options. The context for why and how the participants entered the special education field and their regional GaTAPP programs is critical for understanding their experiences throughout the program.

GaTAPP Experiences

Several alternative teacher preparation program models have been developed nationwide (Espinoza et al., 2018; Wilcox & Samaras, 2009). Georgia Rule 505-3-.05 (2023) dictates the requirements of regional GaTAPP programs and their participants. Candidates receive training, professional development, and coaching in job-embedded experiences in planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction, and professional responsibilities. Candidates should demonstrate evidence of proficiency in identified pedagogical content standards and dispositions. This study's participants provided in-depth information concerning their personal and professional experiences

through the completion of their regional GaTAPP program. Analysis of the transcript data revealed common subcategories of their experiences within the GaTAPP program and their respective schools.

Although none of the participants went through the same GaTAPP program together, David and Linda completed the program through the same northern regional agency, and Danielle and Holly completed the program through the same southern regional agency. All participants taught at different rural schools in different counties. Table 3 organizes this information.

Table 3

Participants' Locations, Programs, and Schools

Participant	Location	GaTAPP Program	School System
David	North Georgia	Program A	System A
Linda	North Georgia	Program A	System B
Danielle	South Georgia	Program B	System C
Holly	South Georgia	Program B	System D

David worked as a long-term substitute in the year before assuming the role of teacher of record for the classroom and entering the GaTAPP program. Holly could not get into the GaTAPP program until her second year of teaching, and she taught under a temporary certificate the first year. Both Linda and Danielle were able to enroll in their GaTAPP programs during their first year of teaching.

Considering their experiences within their GaTAPP programs, all participants noted their respective programs contained a mixture of teacher profiles including

prekindergarten through high school, general education, gifted, English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and special education. The participants described common experiences related to the program's content and how it primarily targeted general education teachers and students despite their varying lenses of classroom experiences impacting how they interpreted their program experiences. David recalled "an assignment" specific to special education, with the remaining coursework predominantly being general education. Linda's experience included "different SPED things," but she emphasized, "The only complaint I would have about the whole program is that it was mostly geared towards older children." Danielle noted, "I had to figure out how to tailor [the information] to a self-contained classroom, and so much of it is for the general education population." Holly had a unique experience. At the time of her program enrollment, her GaTAPP program partnered with the regional service agency to provide separate training for special education candidates.

> With the exception of the deep dive into special education that I did through our regional special education, a lot of it really felt like busy work. I was very underwhelmed. But everything that I was underwhelmed with, I guess maybe was more general education curriculum, or more kind of learning the ins and outs of education.

Another common thread in the participants' GaTAPP program experiences was the impact of deconstructing standards and behavior management components on their approach to classroom management and instructional practices. Although each participant relayed the topics differently, they highlighted common impacts on their teaching

practices because of the associated tasks. David likened the deconstructing standards coursework to the depth of knowledge tasks he completed.

> I think the number one thing I learned from there is the depth of knowledge assignment. That really sticks with me and different levels of trying to meet students' needs, especially being in SPED. There it varies. I got the most out of developing questions that are more challenging, ones that are less challenging. Trying to set manageable benchmarks, but they're also ones that they're gonna have to work a little bit towards too.

Danielle spoke of specialists who presented sessions in her GaTAPP program and the implications of what she learned from them. Regarding the behavior specialist sessions, she stated, "That was extremely beneficial at that moment because I was having so many behaviors, and I mean, they completely diminished because I was able to utilize those strategies that I continue to utilize." A math specialist conducted standards work with the candidates.

> I think the other thing that was really applicable during that was them teaching us how to unpack the standards, which was great because then I could take those. My students at the time could access some of the standards, and I just had to figure out which ones and on what grade level. So that was extremely helpful that we learned to unpack them, to be able to write lesson plans they wanted us to write.

Holly referenced the culminating project concerning what she attained from the program related to standards coursework.

> Actually, the capstone project, I think that really informed me a lot of how I think about how I need to be thinking about my teaching and how you want to be

> teaching toward an end goal, whatever that end goal may be. But doing that project was like seeing, ok, this is how the standards line up with the curriculum, and this is how the curriculum should inform the way you think about collecting your data and teaching. It put it all in perspective.

Despite the differences in enrollment periods and regional locations, all four participants complimented the mentor support provided by the GaTAPP staff. Although these individuals were not located at their school sites, the participants acknowledged these mentors were accessible for support when needed. David's program provided additional optional sessions for support. David noted, "Throughout the week they would set up sessions that we could join, and we'd be involved." Linda described her GaTAPP support by stating, "They were really, really good about working with us, explaining what was needed, answering any questions." Danielle appreciated her GaTAPP program mentor "was able to help check those boxes off" of the numerous requirements to meet.

In addition to GaTAPP experiences related to the program specifically, a theme emerged of participants' work and professional experiences while in the GaTAPP program. All four participants described feelings of anxiousness, uncertainty, and chaos for those initial days in the classroom. However, all four participants noted the students' impact on them in those moments. Linda referenced her students in responding to what she was most comfortable doing as a teacher in those first days.

> Working with the kids. I mean in all honesty, just teaching them, learning with them, sitting with them, exploring with them. Learning how they learn, and I've always loved that. That's always been something I've enjoyed anyways, so that just came naturally. I think to me, I was just able to do that with them.

Danielle jokingly stated, “I think I was more nervous than the kids were to be in a new environment.” David recognized the “learning curve” he experienced in those first days and relied upon his positive rapport with the students to overcome challenging moments.

Despite their different GaTAPP enrollment periods in two different regions of Georgia, there were commonalities among the experiences relayed by all four participants. All participants articulated perceptions of the overall program design primarily targeting general education teachers, program emphasis on behavior management and standard deconstruction, GaTAPP staff support, and student emphasis while navigating the emotions of the first days in the classroom. These experiences ultimately impacted their attitudes, beliefs, and practices, which will be addressed in Chapter VI. Within these experiences, the Challenges theme emerged.

Challenges

Teacher burnout was linked to the special education teacher shortage in terms of perceived lack of support with ongoing challenges and work demands exceeding the capacity to meet those demands (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Espinoza et al., 2018; Soini et al., 2019; Thornton et al., 2007). Challenges emerged as a theme among this study’s transcript data. Through deeper analysis, subcategories emerged as personal, program-based, and school-based challenges. Despite the differences in schools, GaTAPP program locations, and enrollment periods, the participants cited common challenges.

Previously noted as a theme within the participants' GaTAPP program experiences, all four participants referenced the general education emphasis as a GaTAPP program challenge with little specially designed instruction emphasis. This was evidenced by phrases such as, “tailored to general education; figuring out how to apply it

to my self-contained classroom; not specific to SDI; and geared to general ed." The common personal challenge for all four participants was balancing personal, work, and student life. David described this challenge as a "juggling act." He noted the changes he made to his daily life in working to find a balance between these.

> I started getting to school earlier, and I would do my work here in the mornings, or as much as I could, and then go about the school day. Then, I would reserve time at home, too. So, I just had to make sure that I was able to get my schedule aligned with the school schedule and then with the GaTAPP program schedule, too.

Linda's challenges in balancing personal, work, and student life factored into her responsibilities as a single mom.

> It was a lot. I mean, it wasn't an overabundance, but it was a lot to take on as a single mom, trying to do work and do this. And while it wasn't hard, there were days where I was like, I just can't. Why am I even trying this type of thing? So that was the hardest part, but everybody was real great and supportive.

Danielle expressed the challenge of "just keeping up with the assignments," teaching, and her responsibilities as a mother, while Holly referenced a traumatic event that challenged her personal, work, and student life balance.

> I experienced a really traumatic situation with my daughter. So, it was a matter of me being able to bounce back emotionally because my daughter was fine. That really took its toll on me, and it felt like it made me not the best student, which was very upsetting to me. I would say that was my biggest challenge was how to separate those two worlds and to compartmentalize them.

When speaking about challenges in general during the GaTAPP program enrollment, an emerging theme in participants' responses was school-specific challenges. David, Danielle, and Holly referenced gaps in their schools' support systems. David was challenged to communicate with his school-assigned mentor and noted, "I think the greatest challenge was probably the mentor that I was assigned through Georgia Network for Educational Therapeutic Support (GNETS) was not in my building or the county, so it was tough to get involved with him." Danielle was not assigned a school-based mentor, but recognizing she needed support, she sought help from a colleague and suggested, "It's just something she did because I had questions." In contrast, Holly expressed her gratitude for her school-based mentor's support but lacked support from the school administrators. She stated, "I believe there were supposed to be supports in place. However, I feel like my school did not do a good job. My mentor teacher did an amazing job." Linda did not directly express school-based challenges, but she identified other candidates with different experiences in her cohort.

> I know some people in the program who didn't have as good community support in their area. The more support you have from upper administration and from other teachers in that building, the better. They're going to learn, and they're going to progress.

A theme of challenges emerged among the participants' experiences through their GaTAPP program journey. The challenges, as identified and explained by each participant, revealed beliefs and attitudes about their role and subsequently informed their practices as rural special education teachers to be discussed in a later section. Not only

were common challenges a theme among participants' experiences, but so were resources for performing their job duties and responsibilities.

Resources

Education finance funding formulas traditionally equated to lower financial resources for rural schools, often impacting the availability of physical materials and additional personnel (Nguyen, 2020). All participants perceived they had the material resources they needed to meet their job's demands; if anything was lacking, they had the means to eventually attain them. David noted, "I haven't had a shortage of anything here. We've been able to have pretty much everything we need." Linda suggested her confidence in acquiring resources and emphasized, "So even if I don't necessarily have those resources on hand immediately, I feel that they are going to be there for me eventually. Somebody's going to work with me to get what I need to succeed." Danielle indicated she had all the material resources she needed; however, she expressed concern about needing an additional paraprofessional to support her students. Holly was reassured she had all the required resources and noted, "I think it's just a matter of finding the time and knowing how to pull those resources together efficiently."

Bakker and Demerouti (2007) emphasized the need for more than physical resources; they also emphasized the psychological, social, and organizational resources crucial to achieving work goals, reducing job demands, and stimulating employee growth. In analyzing the interview transcripts, a pattern of the most valued resource emerged. Teachers perceive their colleagues as resources (Soini et al., 2019). All four participants emphasized the importance and value of collaboration with their colleagues

and general collegial support. References were made concerning organized and impromptu collaboration aligned with the impact of their experiences.

Although articulated differently, the commonality of collaboration and collegial support was evident. David described his school team's collaboration.

> I think a lot of the support we have is certain days where we would meet up as a SPED group, and it's normally done in our lead's room. There we talk about how we've approached students, what we need to work on, contact parents if we have to. Things like that. So, I think it's good communication and keeping everyone in the loop.

Linda shared a classroom with other special education teachers, greatly impacting her appreciation of collegial support and collaboration.

> There were four of us. Our desks were all in the room together. So, in the mornings and in the afternoons and during lunch, we were in there together, and I was able to just be like, 'I don't understand, or I need help,' and immediately they would come to my aid. It was just the way we happened to be set up, but it was nice to be able to have that. Almost like having your next-door neighbor teacher, but we were all in one room together.

In addition to this impromptu collaboration and immediate collegial support, Linda described her team's organized collaboration.

> We meet together once a month, all of us, all the SPED teachers, the resource teachers, the co-teachers, the self-contained teachers, as well as our therapists. We all meet together once a month as a team and discuss everything, any questions, any concerns, any changes. I think the way that is setup is extremely helpful, and

> we can go to each other with anything. Any questions, and we'll figure it out together.

Despite working with the smallest special education department among the participants, Danielle noted the importance of collaboration and collegial support by stating, "So I pretty much just depend on my coworkers, whomever that I know that has that knowledge for me, and it's really nice that everybody lets you bug them."

Holly acknowledged her appreciation for collaborating with her special education lead and department at her school. However, she extended this to acknowledge the critical resource of "good strong administrators at the board level who are there to answer any of our questions and building that support system infrastructure." She emphasized the district leadership's role in ensuring the structure and capacity developed at the school level. Adequate administrative and collegial support is critical to special education teachers' perceived capacity to fulfill job duties and responsibilities (Bettini et al., 2020; Cancio et al., 2018; Thornton et al., 2007).

Baker and Demerouti's (2007) job demands-resources theory was foundational to this study's conceptual framework. It was critical to explore the participants' perceptions of their roles' demands compared to their perceived accessible resources in relation to their experiences. Within the theme of resources, the subcategories of materials and collaboration and collegial support were evident. All four participants perceive to have accessible materials to fulfill their job duties and responsibilities. Organized and impromptu collaboration with their colleagues and general collegial support was evident as the most critical resource for the participants. In reflection of their experiences, the Improvements to Strengthen Alternative Program theme emerged.

Improvements to Strengthen Alternative Program

This study's purpose was to hear the stories of rural special education teachers who pursued an alternative preparation pathway to better identify the perceived support they needed through their preparation process and work experiences. Their experiences provided considerable insights for district and school administrators, GaTAPP program designers and instructors, and individuals contemplating the special education field. Through their stories, the theme of common Improvements to Strengthen Alternative Program emerged with evident subcategories of participants' recommendations for GaTAPP program instructors, school administrators, and those considering the special education field as a career.

Given the general education emphasis of their respective GaTAPP programs, the participants each generally recommended greater special education emphasis for special education candidates to strengthen the alternative program. Each participant's respective teaching assignment provided a specific lens for GaTAPP program recommendations. Danielle's self-contained class setting required extensive modifications, so her insights were reflective of those specific environment expectations.

> Oh, definitely make sure that it [program information] can be tailored for a class like mine. Like as they're looking at each section or each lesson that needs to be what's required of the students, to make sure that they can be tailored to especially a self-contained special ed environment.

Danielle further emphasized the importance of the program staff having a clear understanding of candidates' roles: "You've got to make sure you understand what our

classroom environments look like so that you can understand how and why that's not even going to work in our classes."

Holly acknowledged the broader audience her GaTAPP program targeted and the subsequent need to cover general curriculum components, but she did suggest program instructors "keep in mind that they do need to design some specific things to talk about special education, and it needs to be more than like a 45-minute presentation on what special education is." She extended her recommendation to reiterate not just special education teachers provide instruction to special education students.

> I don't see any reason why there shouldn't be really like a day-long seminar, even for what special education is like. How did it start? How does it affect your classroom? So just making sure that they understand the role of the special education, and that we're not just coming in there saying, 'Oh yeah, and here's all this extra work you have got to do.'

Linda's role as a prekindergarten teacher reflected her insights related to age or grade groupings and how to "separate it out" to provide more in-depth training for specific age groups and grade bands.

All four participants shared a common improvement recommendation for school administrators to support teachers going through GaTAPP. This prominent recommendation for administrators related to mentorship and school-level support during program enrollment. All participants cited the significance of ongoing, on-site support through a mentor. Evidence phrases included "someone I could just talk to; the better they're going to progress; make sure that person has a mentor; check in with them."

Holly expanded on the notion of a mentor for candidates during GaTAPP program enrollment.

> Through that process, I would say if you can assign somebody to truly help those teachers because it is a lot in a very small amount of time that you're expected to do. One, check in with them, even if it's like weekly or monthly. Check-in with them.

Each participant's mentor experience was unique. David's school-based mentor was located in a different county, given his GNETS affiliation. Linda shared a classroom with her mentor and felt wholly supported. Danielle did not have an officially designated school mentor but sought one out herself. Holly lacked administrative support but was well supported by her assigned school mentor. Despite these unique experiences, all four participants' prominent recommendation aligned to reflect the criticalness of active school-based mentors for teachers during GaTAPP enrollment. In reflection on their experiences, the recommendation theme for those considering the special education field emerged.

Interestingly, all four participants' recommendations for potential career changers and subsequent pursuit of an alternative preparation program depended on specific attributes. The participants used descriptors to designate required characteristics for those entering the special education field, including "caring for somebody more than specifically themselves, being service-oriented, from the heart, passion, and labor of love." David noted, "It's not a job that I would recommend for anybody that has any selfish mindsets behind anything they do. You're not going to get fulfilled here if that's your case." Similarly, Linda emphasized, "It honestly would depend on the person.

Special ed is not for everybody. If that is where their heart is, I would encourage them to do it." When asked if she would recommend the special education field to others, Danielle did not hesitate when she said, "Oh definitely. It's so rewarding to have students that people say or society says can't and have them do." However, she noted teaching is challenging and must be one's passion to succeed. Linda highlighted the commitment to teaching.

> If they're just looking for a career change, no I don't suggest it because I do truly believe that teaching is a labor of love. You know, you either really love being in education, or you really don't. But if there's somebody that's like, you know, maybe they've always been concerned about how they can help and better students in education, then yeah, I would say, you know, go for it.

The participants' common recognition of the personal commitment required of special education teachers reflects their attitudes, beliefs, and practices resulting from their participation in their respective GaTAPP programs and experiences in their schools. This information answers Research Questions 2 and 3, to be discussed in Chapter VI.

Summary

This study explored the experiences of rural special education teachers who pursued an alternative preparation pathway. Purposeful sampling was used to identify four participants who completed the GaTAPP program in different regions of the state. Interview transcripts were analyzed through an iterative process of coding and categorizing. Analytical memoing generated questions for recoding and recategorizing. Motivation, GaTAPP Experiences, Challenges, Resources, and Improvements to Strengthen Alternative Program were the five themes that emerged by winnowing the

data through the lens of the research data and conceptual framework. Despite their differences in geographic location, background, and GaTAPP program enrollment period, there were connected themes among the participants' motivations for a career change and pursuit of GaTAPP, personal, program, and school experiences, personal and program and school-based challenges, material and organizational and social resources, participants' recommendations for GaTAPP programs, school administrators, and potential career changers. Their experiences resulted in attitudes, beliefs, and practices as rural special education teachers to be discussed in Chapter VI.

Chapter VI

Conclusion

This study focused on the experiences of four rural special education teachers who completed an alternate certification pathway, the Georgia Teacher Academy for Preparation and Pedagogy (GaTAPP) program. Although they were enrolled at different times, two participants completed a North Georgia GaTAPP program, and two completed a South Georgia GaTAPP program. Different rural school systems employed all four participants. These differences resulted in rich data yielding robust narrative profiles to hear the participants' experiences and subsequent attitudes, beliefs and practices resulting from their experiences through their GaTAPP program completion. The guiding research questions are answered in this section.

Research Question 1: How do individuals describe their experiences becoming rural special education teachers using alternative preparation as their certification pathway?

Following Seidman's (2013) structure, the first interview focused on the participants' life histories in the context of their ultimate pursuit of the special education field. Through the revelation of their family structures, reminiscence of schooling memories, and progression to post-secondary education, the first prominent theme emerged as motivation to change career paths and motivation to pursue the GaTAPP program. Understanding the participant's backgrounds is imperative to have a clear

understanding of those motivations and subsequent experiences while completing an alternative preparation pathway.

All four participants were raised in rural communities, left for a time, and eventually returned to rural communities. They each recalled memories of what they considered to be “typical” rural school experiences. Although relayed differently, the participants each acknowledged their rural roots’ eventual impact on later choosing to teach in rural schools. Burton et al. (2013) indicated rural school settings were challenging for teachers who were unfamiliar with the agrarian lifestyle and homogeneous cultures of rural communities. The participants’ understanding of rural living presented one less barrier to their entry into education in rural schools.

Reflecting on their childhood interests, Linda, Danielle, and Holly each acknowledged their long-standing dream to be teachers, while David referenced his admiration for his parents’ service-oriented careers. High school experiences ultimately influenced the participants’ post-secondary education pursuits. All four participants obtained degrees in fields other than education. Each experienced major life events, eventually altering their original career paths. At a crossroads, each participant explored the special education field as a new career option. After determining the special education field was their new career path, each had to determine which alternative certification route to pursue.

Since the participants minimally held bachelor's degrees from accredited universities, they had two options for obtaining special education teacher certification. Both routes enabled the participants to obtain a non-renewable education certificate while working as special education teachers and completing one of the two approved

certification pathways. All four participants chose to complete the GaTAPP program. It is essential to consider the participants' motivation for choosing the GaTAPP program over other pathways.

Despite their differences in demographics, background, location, and life experiences, the participants cited common motives for choosing the GaTAPP program. They noted the accessibility and convenience of the GaTAPP program as key motivators for choosing this route. While discussing their rationale for choosing the GaTAPP program, all four participants referenced their perceptions of this route being easier, more manageable, and not requiring returning to college. Each participant's ongoing personal and family obligations influenced the consideration of these factors. Program practicality, convenience, and short-term program enrollment commitments attracted candidates to specific alternate certification programs (Hogan & Bullock, 2012). Each participant's personal and family obligations impacted their decision to pursue the GaTAPP program and their experiences while completing the program.

The second interview focused on the participants' experiences in the GaTAPP program. Despite the differences in employing school system locations and enrollment periods across two GaTAPP programs in two different geographical locations, common themes emerged among participants' experiences. These program-related, school-related, and personal life experiences answer Research Question 1.

Various alternative preparation program models exist (Espinoza et al., 2018; Wilcox & Samaras, 2009). Georgia Rule 505-3-.05 (2023) dictates the standards and requirements for GaTAPP programs and their participants. The common program-related experiences the participants noted across two different GaTAPP programs indicated

general adherence to these program design standards. Alternative teacher preparation programs have often provided more generalized training and lacked the necessary focus on specialized knowledge and skills required for special education teachers (Mamlin & Diliberto, 2020). Collectively, the participants perceived their GaTAPP program targeted general education candidates primarily. Although each participant identified special education-specific GaTAPP program components, they expressed their desire for more special education-focused program emphasis. Within the general instructional-focused GaTAPP program components, the participants commonly identified two program focus areas notable for informing their teaching practices: deconstructing standards work and exploring behavior management strategies. The final program-related experience all participants commonly highlighted was the support provided by their GaTAPP program personnel. The participants complimented the accessibility of the GaTAPP program staff and the significance of their support and guidance. The participants' GaTAPP experiences included their school-specific experiences through program enrollment and completion.

Although school-related experiences were identified as themes across the participants' experiences becoming rural special education teachers using an alternative certification pathway, each one's experiences were unique to their individual school. Specific teaching assignments and school structures appeared to influence participants' experiences. Without sufficient administrative, collegial, and staff development support, special education teachers experienced greater stress and higher levels of burnout (Bettini et al., 2020; Cancio et al., 2018; Thornton et al., 2007). Conversely, special education teachers' intent to remain in the field was higher when they perceived strong

administrative and collegial support (Bettini et al., 2020). Despite their varying school-related experiences, the participants commonly perceived they had accessible materials to fulfill their job duties and responsibilities during GaTAPP program enrollment and completion. Organized and impromptu collaboration with colleagues and general collegial support emerged as the most crucial resources the participants identified as part of their experiences, ultimately compensating for their perceived lack of special education focus within the program's contents. Equally important to consider were the participants' personal life experiences during the completion of the GaTAPP program.

In addition to the GaTAPP program-specific and school-specific experiences, the participants' personal life experiences contributed to their overall experiences becoming rural special education teachers using an alternative certification pathway. Although the participants' family structures and personal responsibilities varied, all four participants noted the challenges of balancing personal, work, and student life. The participants articulated the personal challenges associated with teaching while learning how to teach. Their awareness of this notion created what they described as anxiousness, uncertainty, and occasional chaos. However, these experiences contributed to their beliefs and attitudes aligned with their role as rural special education teachers to be identified while answering Research Question 2.

Research Question 1 identified how the participants described their experiences becoming rural special education teachers using alternative preparation as their certification pathway. The participant narratives in Chapter IV conveyed the participants' experiences in their own words. In summarizing their collective experiences through the identified themes to answer Research Question 1, it was imperative to consider their

motivations for pursuing the special education field and motivations for choosing the GaTAPP program. The participants commonly described their experiences in terms of program-specific experiences, school-related experiences, and personal life experiences, all ultimately informing their beliefs, attitudes, and practices. Research Question 2 focuses on identifying their resultant beliefs and attitudes.

Research Question 2: What beliefs and attitudes resulted from using an alternative preparation as a pathway for certification purposes?

The fundamental principle of qualitative interviewing is to create a structure allowing respondents to articulate their understanding in their own words (Patton, 2015). The essence of the interview questions prompted the participants to describe and reflect on their experiences while pursuing an alternative certification pathway and serving as rural special education teachers. This reconstruction of details required them to select events to describe and, through this process, impart meaning to their experiences (Seidman, 2013). Bakker and Demerouti's (2007) job demands-resources theory provided a framework for understanding how the participants perceived and articulated their knowledge, training, and experiential resources while completing GaTAPP and serving as rural special education teachers. This reconstruction and reflection process yielded participants' identification and articulation of their subsequent beliefs, attitudes, and practices. Before considering the resultant practices, identifying the participants' beliefs and aligned attitudes resulting from their experiences is essential.

Evidenced by the emerging themes and subthemes, common participant beliefs and attitudes were identified through their experiences while completing the GaTAPP program and employed as rural special education teachers. Previously noted in the

literature, collaboration and collegial support were valued teacher resources and indicators associated with teachers' intent to remain in education (Bettini et al., 2020; Cancio et al., 2018; Soini et al., 2019; Thornton et al., 2007). Similarly, a prominent belief expressed by the participants was collaborative opportunities and collegial support as critical and valued resources. The resultant attitude expressed by the participants was collaboration and collegial support were integral to their successful completion of GaTAPP and should subsequently be prioritized by school administrators.

Despite expressed concerns with the general education emphasis of their respective GaTAPP programs, the participants believe their overall experiences through the GaTAPP program provided them with adequate knowledge, training, and skills to fulfill their duties and responsibilities as rural special education teachers. The impromptu collegial collaboration and support compensated for perceived program gaps. Program-specific and school-specific supports were integral components of their preparation experiences. The overarching resultant attitude from the participants was the GaTAPP program is a valuable alternative certification pathway, with school support playing a critical role in the candidates' successful completion of the program. Two additional beliefs and aligned attitudes were identified as participants reflected explicitly on the GaTAPP program contents and requirements aligned to their experiences. The participants commonly believed behavior management was critical to teaching and learning. Their aligned attitude was that learning does not occur until the behavior is addressed. As a result of their experiences, the participants believed once behaviors were addressed, the process of deconstructing the learning standards was critical for understanding "the why" of instruction for students. Their aligning attitudes reflected the

need for teachers to understand the “end goal” for designing instruction to inform their approach to tasks, assessments, and progress monitoring. In addition to these pedagogical beliefs and attitudes, participants’ overarching beliefs and attitudes about special education teachers were identified.

The participants' consideration of their philosophies of education and perceptions of their roles as special education teachers through the lens of their experiences completing the GaTAPP program resulted in the identification of shared beliefs and attitudes. All four participants reiterated the belief that the special education field requires a service-oriented mindset and passion for the work required of special education teachers. The participants’ resultant attitude was that the special education field is not for everyone. This belief and attitude yielded the identification of a final belief and attitude.

The final belief, resulting from their experiences related to their perceptions of their roles as special education teachers, is the special education teacher’s role is to meet students with disabilities at their point of need and simultaneously support, encourage, and push for continual growth. Despite the variance in participants’ teaching assignments, all four participants articulated the interpretation of their role similarly. Their resultant attitude reflected those who do not understand the special education field overlook students’ abilities. The participants expressed their urgency for empathizing with their students’ needs while challenging them to master goals, target their deficit areas, and realize struggle is part of attaining mastery.

The participants’ reconstruction of details of their experiences prompted the identification and articulation of their subsequent beliefs, attitudes, and practices. The participants shared beliefs and attitudes related to their valued resources, GaTAPP

program components, and the interpretations of their roles as special education teachers. Research Question 3 considered the participants' aligned practices resulting from their experiences and subsequent beliefs and attitudes.

Research Question 3: What practices resulted from using an alternative preparation as a pathway for certification purposes?

The lack of prerequisite coursework and field experiences before starting a full-time teaching role offered different experiences for the study's participants than those who pursued traditional teacher preparation programs. As the participants reconstructed details and articulated an understanding of their experiences to identify their beliefs and attitudes, they simultaneously revealed practices aligned with them. Despite their varying backgrounds, teaching assignments, and school locations, the four participants noted common practices resulting from using an alternative preparation as a pathway for certification purposes.

When considering the prominent belief that collaborative opportunities and collegial support were critical and valued resources, all four participants referenced their practice of engaging in impromptu and organized collegial collaboration. All participants indicated their schools had designated collaborative sessions; however, the participants equally valued the impromptu collaboration resulting from asking colleagues questions or working alongside others to troubleshoot issues. Often connected with collaboration and collegial support, the participants highlighted their practices associated with two identified instructional-related beliefs and attitudes. The participants referenced their behavior management practices for establishing and emphasizing classroom procedures, routines, and relationship-building with students. Each described their practices for

approaching and designing lessons based on their beliefs for deconstructing learning standards. Through their job-embedded learning experiences, the participants articulated three interwoven practices, including engaging in impromptu and organized collaboration, establishing classroom procedures and routines, and designing lessons, resulting from their beliefs about the GaTAPP program, the special education field, and their roles as rural special education teachers.

The participants spoke of recommending the GaTAPP program to others considering an alternative preparation pathway based on their beliefs and attitudes about the GaTAPP program as a valuable alternative certification pathway. The participants' beliefs and attitudes of personal attributes required for the special education field were noted in their practices for encouraging those considering the special education field to self-reflect on a personal passion for service-oriented work and educating students with disabilities. The final practice the participants identified resulted from their experiences related to their beliefs about special education teachers' roles. The participants expressed their realization that those outside of special education may not have an in-depth understanding of their students' needs. Their resultant practice was to intervene and advocate for their students' needs. Table 4 summarizes the participants' beliefs, attitudes, and practices resulting from their participation in an alternative preparation pathway for certification purposes.

Table 4

Summary of Participants' Beliefs, Attitudes, and Practices

Belief	Attitude	Practice
Collaborative opportunities and collegial support were critical and valued resources.	Collaboration and collegial support were integral to their successful completion of GaTAPP and should be prioritized by administrators.	Engaged in collegial collaboration
The overall experiences in the GaTAPP program provided adequate knowledge, training, and skills to fulfill their responsibilities as rural special education teachers.	The GaTAPP program is a valuable alternative certification pathway, and school support is critical to candidates' successful completion.	Encouraged others to pursue GaTAPP
Behavior management was critical to teaching and learning.	Learning does not occur until the behavior is addressed.	Emphasized classroom procedures, routines, and relationship-building with students
Deconstruction of the learning standards was critical for understanding "the why" of instruction for students.	Teachers need to understand the "end goal" when designing instruction, which will inform their tasks, assessments, and progress monitoring approaches.	Designed lessons based on the "why" of the standards with the "end goal" in mind
The special education field requires a service-oriented mindset and passion for the work required of special education teachers.	The special education field is not for everyone.	Encouraged others to reflect on their passion for the special education field
The special education teacher's role is to meet SWDs at their point of need and simultaneously support, encourage, and push them for continual growth.	Those who do not understand the special education field overlook students' abilities.	Advocated for their special education students' needs

Limitations

Each research method has its own limitations and advantages (Seidman, 2013). Rich data collection reduced plausible threats in this study. Periodic reviews by the participants allowed for the correction of possible misinterpretations. The intent of the research questions was to maintain a focus on hearing the participants' experiences.

Although deliberate research design decisions were made, this study's limitations relating to researcher bias and generalizability were considered and are discussed in this section.

A strength of the in-depth interviewing associated with Seidman's (2013) three-interview series is the ability to elicit an understanding of the intricacies of the participant's experiences from their perspective. Seidman (2013) highlighted that despite the interviewer's efforts to ensure the meaning-making results from the participant's reconstruction and reflection, "the interviewer must nevertheless recognize that the meaning is, to some degree, a function of the participant's interaction with the interviewer" (p. 26). As such, researcher bias should be considered.

The researcher served as a special education teacher in rural schools for 13 years. Currently, the researcher serves as a special education director and is actively involved in the recruitment and retention efforts within a rural school system's special education department. Kim (2016) emphasized the importance of maintaining a conscious process of reflexivity at every stage of the process to remain aware of the researcher's role in the study. Ongoing researcher memoing was conducted as part of the reflexivity process. The identification of potential biases was considered and explored during the study's design phase. Reflexivity occurred between interviews through analytical memoing while periodic reviews of interview transcripts by the participants and subsequent data were conducted to correct potential misinterpretations. In addition to researcher bias, components of generalizability should be considered as possible limitations.

Maxwell (2013) referenced internal and external generalizability. Internal generalizability considers "the generalizability of a conclusion within the case setting or group studied," and external generalizability refers to "the generalizability beyond that

case, setting, or group, to other persons, times, and setting" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 137). This study focused specifically on rural special education teachers who chose an alternative preparation pathway for certification purposes. During the first interviews, all four participants identified their alternative preparation pathway was the GaTAPP program. The information relayed in this study was specific to these participants' experiences in the GaTAPP program. The results may not be generalizable to teachers completing a certification only or master's program or teachers employed in private, urban, or inner-city schools.

The sample size included only four participants enrolled in two GaTAPP programs with one program located in northern Georgia and the other in the state's southern half. All four participants were employed in different rural school systems. In consideration of the small sample size, it is reasonable to consider Seidman's (2013) insights as he stated, "The method of in-depth phenomenological interviewing applied to a sample of participants who all experience similar structural and social conditions gives enormous power to the stories of a relatively few participants," (p. 59). Rich data and subsequent descriptions from the four participants' three interview series yielded sufficiency and saturation for this study (Seidman, 2013). Despite the study's potential limitations, consideration of the implications should be considered and will be discussed in the next section.

Implications

Early career special education teachers faced a higher attrition risk than their general education counterparts (Soini et al., 2019; Thornton et a.l, 2007). Espinoza et al. (2018) further clarified attrition was significantly higher among teachers who lacked

pedagogical preparation, with those teachers leaving the profession at more than twice the rate of their highly qualified colleagues. Likewise, the risk of attrition increased when teachers' work demands surpassed their capacity to meet the demands (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). The resultant special education teacher shortages have impacted schools' abilities to effectively provide special education services (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Bruno et al., 2018; Green et al., 2020; Whitford et al., 2017). However, enrollment in alternative preparation programs for individuals seeking special education certification has increased throughout Georgia (Georgia Insights, 2024). As alternative preparation routes emerge as viable recruitment veins for special education teaching vacancies, it is imperative to consider the experiences of those completing an alternative preparation program leading to certification. Implications specific for school system administrators and GaTAPP program personnel are considered in this section.

The overall variance in the participants' experiences appeared contingent upon their school-level experiences while completing their respective GaTAPP programs. This variance was commonly noted by the amount of school-level support the participants perceived they received during their program enrollment. As participants reconstructed experiences, they appeared to link negative experiences with a gap in or lack of school-level administrative or mentor support. Additionally, the participants appeared to link positive experiences with peer collaboration opportunities and collegial support. The implication for district and school administrators is to consider the on-site support provided to special education teachers while enrolled in the GaTAPP program. Based on participants' responses, the following questions should be considered as school administrators assess their on-site support for candidates: What support is provided by the

district and school-level administrators? How frequently are these administrators checking in on their GaTAPP candidates? Who is assigned as a collegial mentor? What are their strengths and weaknesses in supporting others? How frequently is the collegial mentor checking in with the GaTAPP candidate? Who oversees the school-level support practices? In addition to implications for school system administration, there are implications for GaTAPP program personnel.

The participants indicated their respective GaTAPP program experiences prepared them to meet their jobs' demands as rural special education teachers. They commonly referenced the varying range of candidates' teaching assignments within their respective GaTAPP cohorts and the subsequent general education focus of the program contents. Although all participants noted special education-specific components in their GaTAPP contents, there appeared to be variance in the depth of special education content focus. Some participants suggested although their GaTAPP personnel were supportive, they appeared to lack a thorough understanding of the various special education settings and the range of students' needs within those settings. Based on participants' responses, GaTAPP program personnel should consider the following implications: alignment of GaTAPP support personnel based on expertise in candidates' teaching assignments and consideration for the depth of specialized focus provided to the range of candidates' teaching assignments.

This study's purpose was to hear the participants' selected and reconstructed experiences as they completed an alternative preparation program for special education certification. Implications were identified for schools to consider the level of on-site support provided to teachers through program completion and implications for GaTAPP

programs to consider the specialization of their content and support. All four participants experienced major life events resulting in their pursuit of the special education field. A common implication for both schools and GaTAPP programs is the consideration of understanding whom these individuals are seeking alternative certification pathways and their experiences which brought them to consider the special education field. In addition to the study's implications, recommendations for future research, school administrators, and alternative program personnel were also identified and are discussed in the next section.

Recommendations

Decades of research exist on special education teacher burnout, turnover, subsequent implications, and proposed solutions, including alternative teacher preparation programs. Despite the extensive literature, rural schools continue to face special education teacher shortages (Burrola et al., 2023; Burton et al., 2013; Goldhaber et al., 2010; Oyen & Schweinle, 2020). This study explored, as recounted by the participants, the experiences of four rural special education teachers who pursued and completed an alternative certification pathway, the GaTAPP program. Their stories and subsequent results and conclusions answer the research questions, reiterate previous research findings, provide new information for this body of literature, and prompt recommendations for consideration for future studies, school administrators with special education teachers pursuing an alternative certification pathway, and alternative program personnel.

This study focused on teachers' experiences who successfully completed an alternative preparation program for special education certification. Answering Research

Question 1 captured the participants' reconstruction of those experiences and revealed personal and professional challenges through their program completion. Exploration of the challenges they experienced prompted consideration of the resources the participants perceived to be critical to their successful GaTAPP completion. Overall, the participants credited collaboration and collegial and administrative support as integral to their success through the program. The participants referenced the awareness of others in their respective cohorts who did not complete the GaTAPP program. Newton et al. (2020) noted alternative teacher preparation programs had high dropout rates and highlighted the need for program completion support. Little to no literature explored the experiences of candidates who did not complete their alternative preparation program. Given the continued special education teacher shortage, it is equally important to study and understand the experiences of those dropping out of alternative preparation programs and the potential implications for school personnel and alternative preparation pathway program staff.

Research Question 2 focused on the participants' beliefs and attitudes resulting from pursuing an alternative certification pathway. Several beliefs and attitudes were identified, and one overarching belief lent to recommendations. Overall, the participants believed the GaTAPP program provided adequate knowledge, training, and skills to fulfill their responsibilities as rural special education teachers. Provisionally or temporarily certified special education teachers had a greater attrition risk than new, fully certified special education teachers (Brownell et al., 2002). Childre (2014) suggested attrition data indicated teacher candidates exited teacher preparation programs underprepared for their special education teaching roles. The participants in this study all

exited their respective GaTAPP programs within the last five years or less. Although extensive research was conducted on special education teacher burnout and turnover, a gap was evident in the literature related to research on burnout of special education teachers who completed an alternative certification pathway. According to data from the Georgia Insights Educator Pipeline Dashboard (2024), 418 individuals from P-20 Regions in Georgia were enrolled in non-traditional special education certification pathways in 2023, up from 346 enrollees in 2022. In contrast, 547 individuals from the same regions enrolled in traditional special education certification pathways in 2023, marking a significant decline from 1,231 enrollees in 2022. Given the increased enrollment in alternative preparation pathways for special education certification in Georgia, studies exploring the longevity and intent to remain in the special education field of alternatively prepared special education teachers are needed. All four participants indicated their connection to family or friends who were knowledgeable about the special education field was influential to their ultimate career change selection and identification of the GaTAPP program as an alternative pathway for certification. An additional recommendation for future studies focusing on identifying trends or patterns in original career paths for those who chose a career change to the special education field would be informative to schools' recruitment efforts.

The review of the literature identified various alternative teacher preparation program models, with quality varying similarly to traditional teacher preparation programs (Espinoza et al., 2018; Wilcox & Samaras, 2009). Significant variability within and across states was noted in Quigney's (2010) study on alternative teacher preparation programs for special education teachers. Alternative teacher preparation programs often

provided more generalized training, lacking the specialized knowledge and skill focus for special education teachers (Mamlin & Diliberto, 2020). Despite their different GaTAPP enrollment periods in two different regions of Georgia, there were commonalities among the experiences all four participants relayed concerning general education content, indicating some program consistency across the state. Overall, the participants expressed their GaTAPP programs were primarily geared toward general education candidates. While each participant acknowledged the inclusion of special education-specific components, they expressed a desire for greater emphasis on special education within the program. Further studies of the special education components of the current GaTAPP programs would be informative in identifying commonalities, differences, implementation strengths, and potential needs. A similar study purposefully selecting rural special education teachers who completed the traditional certification-only or master's program for certification purposes would allow for the exploration of experience variances.

Based on how the participants described their experiences becoming rural special education teachers using an alternative preparation pathway and their subsequent beliefs, attitudes, and practices, it is imperative to consider this information to identify recommendations for school system administrators and GaTAPP program personnel. An overarching recommendation based on the study results is ongoing active cohort collaboration within and among GaTAPP programs and respective participating school systems. The remainder of this section will focus on recommendations based on the study results for collaborative activities for GaTAPP programs and respective participating school systems to foster specialization in candidates' teaching role preparation.

It is recommended district, school, and GaTAPP personnel collaborate to identify relevant mentors and supporting staff for individual GaTAPP candidates. This collaboration should include the special education director or designee, principal or designee, and GaTAPP personnel with expertise in special education. Each candidate's teaching assignment, including disability areas served, grade levels, and special education service models, should be discussed and considered for identifying an on-site mentor and GaTAPP supporting staff. To effectively support the GaTAPP candidate, assigned mentors and supporting staff need direct knowledge and understanding of the candidate's daily duties and responsibilities, along with the capacity to balance their personal workload while providing direct support to the candidate. According to the Georgia Professional Standards Commission, GaTAPP personnel supporting candidates are required to have certification and expertise aligned to the candidate's teaching assignment (2023). If GaTAPP personnel have limited special education experience in the candidate's teaching assignment, it is recommended that the GaTAPP program consider recruiting retired special educators to support special education candidates.

In addition, the candidate's previous experience and background should be reviewed to determine a minimum school-level, district-level, and GaTAPP-level check-in calendar with the flexibility to increase check-in frequency based on the candidate's feedback or mentor and GaTAPP supporting staff recommendations. School-level check-ins should minimally occur weekly, district-level check-ins should minimally occur bi-weekly, and GaTAPP program check-ins should minimally occur monthly outside of scheduled cohort sessions. The school-level check-ins could focus on school-specific items such as grading procedures and practices and district curriculum expectations. The

district check-ins could focus on district-specific special education procedures and IEP database platform use. The GaTAPP check-ins should focus on progress with program-specific tasks and requirements. Candidate Support Team meetings should continue as outlined by GaTAPP program requirements and include updates from the multi-level check-ins.

Furthering the collaborative work between GaTAPP programs and respective participating school systems, it is recommended the special education directors or designees from participating school systems each facilitate at least one content-specific session for all special education GaTAPP candidates. Rural schools typically have limited staffing to effectively support their GaTAPP candidates, as evidenced by the participants' reconstructed experiences. Likewise, GaTAPP staff do not always understand special educators' classroom dynamics, as evidenced by the participants' reconstructed experiences. By merging resources and knowledge through collaboration, rural school systems and GaTAPP staff serving in rural areas would provide candidates with increased support and special-education-specific knowledge sessions, both noted by the participants as lacking at times. Consideration of each recommendation would potentially improve on-site support and mentorship for special education GaTAPP candidates. Subsequently, rural schools' retention of these candidates would potentially improve.

Summary

Due to the ongoing nationwide special education teacher shortage, school leaders have focused on understanding special education teacher burnout factors and embraced alternative teacher preparation programs as a viable recruitment vein. The literature indicated these programs were broadly structured, often leading to knowledge gaps for

candidates. With limited resources, school leaders worked to strengthen specialized support for their teachers pursuing alternative certification pathways for special education. Do candidates perceive the support as sufficient?

Chapter I encompassed the information relevant to explaining the problem for consideration, the study's purpose, research questions, complete conceptual framework, and methodology summary. This study focused on hearing the stories of four participants who were employed as rural special education teachers, pursued, and completed an alternative certification pathway, the GaTAPP program. Bakker and Demerouti's (2007) job demands-resources theory was the foundation of the conceptual framework for which three research questions were derived to guide this study. Consideration of the literature was necessary to better identify existing gaps. Chapter II included relevant literature on special education teacher burnout, special education teacher shortages, special education teacher shortages in rural schools, alternative teacher preparation programs, and the job demands-resources model. With a clear understanding of the literature and the problem and purpose through the context of the conceptual framework and guiding research questions, the methodology structure was defined.

Chapter III presented the methodology for this study. The study centered on four participants who were employed as special education teachers and completed an alternative preparation program within the last five years. Seidman's (2013) three-interview series was used to capture the participants' reconstruction of their experiences. Interview data was used to develop participant profiles included in Chapter IV. The iterative process of coding and categorizing the interview transcripts yielded rich data and

descriptions and five emerging themes: motivation, GaTAPP experiences, challenges, resources, and recommendations.

The results in Chapter V included a discussion of each theme and subsequent subcategories. Despite differences in geographic location, background, and GaTAPP program enrollment periods, participants shared common themes in their motivations for a career change and pursuit of GaTAPP, and their personal, program, and school experiences. The participants faced similar personal, program, and school-based challenges and had comparable material, organizations, and social resources. They offered recommendations for GaTAPP programs, school administrators, and potential career changers. These experiences shaped their attitudes, beliefs, and practices as rural special education teachers. Chapter VI focused on these resultant attitudes, beliefs, and practices, ultimately answering the research questions.

The participants' reconstruction of the details of their experiences completing an alternative preparation program for certification while employed as rural special education teachers indicated they perceived the GaTAPP program prepared them to meet their jobs' demands. Their responses indicated collaboration and collegial support were valuable resources and integral to their program completion. The variance in participants' experiences appeared to be specific to their individual school-based experiences; administrative and school-site mentor support varied. All participants indicated school administrative and mentor support was critical to successful GaTAPP program completion. Participants' resultant beliefs, attitudes, and practices included the following: collaborative opportunities and collegial support were critical and valued resources; overall GaTAPP program experiences provided adequate knowledge, training, and skills

to fulfill their responsibilities as rural special education teachers; behavior management was critical to teaching and learning; deconstruction of the learning standards was critical for understanding "the why" of instruction for students; the special education field requires a service-oriented mindset and passion for the work required of special education teachers; the special education teacher's role is to meet students with disabilities at their point of need and simultaneously support, encourage, and push for continual growth. Study limitations were acknowledged; implications for school administrators and GaTAPP personnel should be considered along with recommendations for future studies and for school system administrators and GaTAPP personnel.

Conclusion

For several years, school systems across the country have reported ongoing shortages of special education teachers (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Bruno et al., 2018; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Mamlin & Diliberto, 2020; More & Rodgers, 2020; Theobald et al., 2021). These shortages continue to make it difficult for school leaders to fill vacant positions. According to data from the Georgia Insights Educator Pipeline Dashboard (2024), enrollment in non-traditional special education certification pathways now surpasses enrollment in traditional special education certification pathways. The lack of prerequisite coursework and field experiences before assuming a full-time teaching role creates a distinct set of experiences compared to traditional teacher preparation programs. As the viable recruitment vein for securing special education teachers in rural school systems, district and school administrators must have insights into the experiences and subsequent beliefs, attitudes, and practices of those pursuing an alternative preparation pathway to avoid perpetuating burnout and turnover cycles. The

significance of this study was to hear the experiences, as they recounted, of individuals who pursued an alternative pathway for special education certification.

What significance do these recounted experiences have for school system administrators and GaTAPP personnel? These experiences highlight the need for those supporting candidates to remain cognizant of the candidates' background and personal responsibilities, potentially influencing and impacting their experiences through program completion. School administrators should consider their intentional efforts to support GaTAPP candidates so as not to perpetuate the turnover cycle. The participants referenced their anxiousness associated with "learning how to teach while teaching" and the stress they experienced while balancing personal, work, and student life. Despite these stressors, each noted working with their students was where they felt most comfortable, highlighting their passion for special education. To not perpetuate turnover or burnout of individuals with a passion for the special education field, there is an urgency for school administrators and GaTAPP personnel to prioritize support for GaTAPP candidates. The recounted experiences reiterate the significance of assessing school systems' and regional agencies' collaboration efforts for strengthening and improving support for special education GaTAPP candidates. Although GaTAPP guidelines outline requirements of school systems and program agencies, this information prompts consideration for reassessing the implementation of coaching supports and Candidate Support Team member selection for GaTAPP candidates. This reassessment process would foster potential improvements to support structures for candidates. In addition, schools and regional agencies' collaborative efforts to enhance special education content focus would foster the sustainability of this alternative preparation

pathway for special education certification as a viable recruitment vein for rural school systems.

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Appendix A

Research Request Letter to Superintendent

Dear Superintendent,

My name is Nicole Glass. I am a doctoral student at Valdosta State University. I am conducting a qualitative study titled, "The Experiences of Rural Special Education Teachers Who Chose Alternative Preparation Pathways." The purpose of this research is to inform rural special education directors, curriculum directors, human resource directors, and principals of relevant information related to supporting their special education teachers enrolled in alternative teacher preparation programs.

Teachers meeting the following criteria are eligible participants:

- Current special education teacher
- Completed one of Georgia's two approved alternative certification pathways for special education certification.

I will ask participants to talk about their K-12 education experiences, post-secondary education experiences, alternative preparation program experiences, and special education teacher experiences. The study's findings will inform alternative teacher preparation program designers and rural school administrators of the experiences, needs, challenges, and strengths of being a special education teacher while simultaneously completing an alternative certification pathway.

Appendix B

Interview Guide

Interview 1:

Describe your childhood.

Describe your elementary school years.

Describe your middle/junior high school years.

Describe your high school years.

Describe one of your most memorable experiences in your K-12 education.

What did you do after high school?

What made you decide to pursue this route?

Describe your work experiences prior to becoming a special education teacher.

What motivated you to become a special education teacher?

What motivated you to pursue a special education teaching role in a rural school system?

Interview 2:

Since our last interview, have you thought about what prompted you to become a special education teacher?
This is what I recorded: _____. Share any additional thoughts.

Why did you select this school system to seek employment?

How did you know what steps to take to pursue an alternative preparation pathway?

Why did you choose the particular pathway you pursued (GaTAPP or Master's program)?

Describe your experiences in the alternative preparation program.

Describe your work experiences while you completed the alternative preparation program.

What prior knowledge did you have about special education before becoming a special education teacher?

Describe your first days in a special education classroom.

Describe coursework and/or alternative preparation program tasks specific to your special education role.

Do you work directly with paraprofessionals?
If so, describe your experiences in working with overseeing paraprofessionals.

What school-level training did you receive to support IEP paperwork and compliance responsibilities?

Describe any school support systems that were in place for helping with IEP paperwork and compliance responsibilities.

Describe any mentoring support systems that were in place for you.
Describe your perspectives on these supports. What made you feel this way?

Interview 3:

What is your philosophy of education?

Describe your role as a special education teacher.

What is your greatest challenge as a special education teacher?

Describe the support your school has in place for special education teachers.

Have you attempted the GACE assessment as part of your certification pathway? If so, were you successful?
How did your preparation program prepare you for the GACE assessment?

What aspect(s) of your job were you most comfortable with once you exited the certification program?

What aspect(s) of your job were you least comfortable with once you exited the certification program?

Describe your greatest challenge throughout the process of obtaining your special education certification.

What supports were in place while you were completing the certification program?

Describe your level of preparedness as you started your job as a special education teacher.

How has your level of preparedness changed since completing the special education certification program?

What has had the greatest impact on your level of preparedness?

Do you have the resources (time, training, support, materials, etc.) to do your job as a special education teacher?
If yes, what resources are most important to you?
If no, what resources are lacking?

Would you encourage anyone to become a special education teacher? Why or why not?

Would you recommend anyone pursue an alternative preparation pathway for special education certification? Why or why not?

What recommendations would you give to alternative certification pathway program designers/instructors?

What recommendations would you give to school system administrators who have teachers going through an alternative certification pathway for special education?

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY

Consent to Participate in Research

You are being asked to participate in a research project entitled "The Experiences of Rural Special Education Teachers Who Chose Alternative Preparation Pathways." This research project is being conducted by Nicole Glass, a student in the Department of Leadership, Technology, and Workforce Development at Valdosta State University. The purpose of this research is to inform rural special education directors, curriculum directors, human resource directors, and principals of relevant information related to supporting their special education teachers enrolled in alternative teacher preparation programs. Your participation is entirely voluntary.

As described in more detail below, I will ask you to talk about your K-12 education experiences, post-secondary education experiences, alternative preparation program experiences, and special education teacher experiences. Someone in your position might be interested in participating because it will inform alternative teacher preparation program designers and rural school administrators of the experiences, needs, challenges, and strengths of being a special education teacher while simultaneously completing an alternative certification pathway. Because there are some risks, such as potential anxious feelings in retelling challenging moments, you may not wish to participate. It is important for you to know that you can stop your participation at any time. More information about all aspects of this study is provided below.

This form includes detailed information to help you decide whether to participate in this study. Please read it carefully and ask any questions that you have before you agree to participate. Please be sure to retain a copy of this form for your records.

Procedures: Your participation will involve participating in three separate interviews, which should each take 90 minutes. Your total participation in this project is 4 ½ hours over the course of three separate dates, which will be scheduled at your preference.

There are no alternatives to the procedures in this study. The only alternative is to choose not to participate at all.

Possible Risks or Discomfort: This is a minimal risk research study. That means that the risks of participating are no more likely or serious than those you encounter in everyday activities. Although there are no known risks associated with these research procedures, it is not always possible to identify all potential risks of participating in a research study. However, the University has taken reasonable safeguards to minimize potential but unknown risks.

If you experience psychological distress as a result of your participation in this study, please contact Nicole Glass at 229-220-9630. Neither the researcher nor Valdosta State University has made special provision for services required to treat any psychological distress that results from participation in this research study.

By agreeing to participate in this research project, you are not waiving any rights that you may have against Valdosta State University for injury resulting from negligence of the University or its researchers.

Potential Benefits: Although you will not benefit directly from this research, your participation will help the researcher gain additional understanding of rural special education teachers' experiences who chose alternative preparation pathways. Knowledge gained may contribute to addressing the rural special education teacher shortage and teacher burnout.

Costs and Compensation: There are no costs to you, and there is no compensation (no money, gifts, or services) for your participation in this research project.

Assurance of Confidentiality: Valdosta State University and the researcher will keep your information confidential to the extent allowed by law. Members of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), a university committee charged with reviewing research to ensure the rights and welfare of research participants, may be given access to your confidential information.

The interviews will be audio taped in order to accurately capture your concerns, opinions, and ideas. Once the recordings have been transcribed, the tapes will be destroyed. No one, including the researcher, will be able to associate your responses with your identity.
Voluntary Participation: Your decision to participate in this research project is entirely voluntary. If you agree now to participate and change your mind later, you are free to leave the study. Your decision not to participate at all or to stop participating at any time in the future will not have any effect on any rights you have or any services you are otherwise entitled to from Valdosta State University.

You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer.

Should you decide to withdraw after data collection is complete, your information will be deleted from the database and will not be included in research results.

Information Contacts: Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Nicole Glass at dnglass@valdosta.edu. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions

about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

Agreement to Participate: The research project and my role in it have been explained to me, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, I am indicating that I am 18 years of age or older. I have received a copy of this consent form.

I would like to receive a copy of the results of this study: _____ Yes _____ No

Mailing Address: _____

E-mail Address: _____

_____

Printed Name of Participant

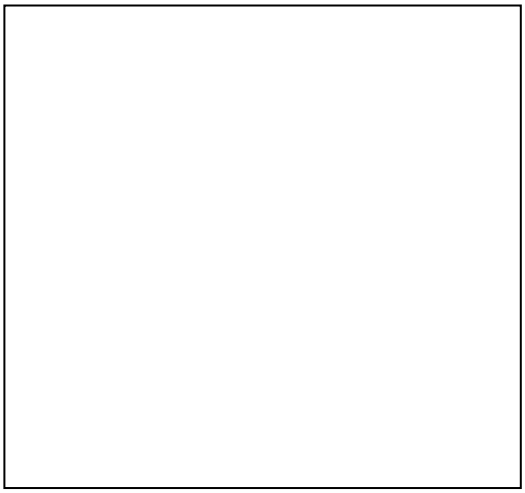
This research project has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Research Participants through the date noted below:

_____

Signature of Participant Date

_____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date



Appendix D

Institutional Review Board Protocol Exemption Form

04.23.2024

Institutional Review Board (IRB)
for the Protection of Human Research Participants

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 04481-2023 **Responsible Researcher:** Doris Nicole Glass

Supervising Faculty: Drs. Michael Bochenko & Kathy Nobles **Co-Investigator:** n/a

Project Title: *The Experiences of Rural Special Education Teachers Who Chose Alternative Preparation Pathways.*

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is **exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations, **category 2.** If the nature of the research changes such that exemption criteria no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research study.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *The approved study is authorized to be conducted at the following research site(s): Decatur County Schools (**04.23.2024**), Seminole County School District (**02.01.2024**), and Pioneer RESA (**02.22.2024**). Additional research sites will be added as LOC's are received.*

- *Exempt protocol guidelines **permit** the recording of interview sessions provided recordings are made to create an accurate transcript. Exempt guidelines **prohibit** the collection, storage, and/or sharing of recordings. Upon creation of the transcript, the recorded interview session must be deleted from each recording and storage devices used.*

- *In keeping with established consent guidelines, interview recordings must include the researcher reading aloud the consent statement, confirming participant understanding, and establishing their willingness to take part in the interview. Participants must be provided with a copy of the research statement.*

- *Upon completion of the research study all data (e.g. data, pseudonym list, email lists, transcript, etc.) must be securely maintained (e.g. locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a minimum of 3 years. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed.*

☒ ***Please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at tmwright@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.***

Elizabeth W. Olphie 02.01.2024

Elizabeth W. Olphie, IRB Administrator Date

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.
Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-259-5045.

Revised: 06.02.16