

Special Education Student Experience: A Case Study of a Georgia High School

A Dissertation submitted
to the Graduate School
Valdosta State University

in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in Leadership

Department of Leadership, Technology, & Workforce Development
of the Dewar College of Education and Human Services

May, 2021

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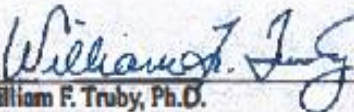
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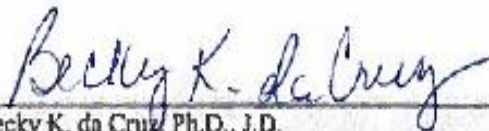
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ABSTRACT

IDEA students graduating at a rate far lower than their peers in the United States (Digest of Education Statistics, 2019). Students with disabilities are currently facing are entering post-secondary life with little or no understanding of their disability or how that disability may impact them in the future. The purpose of this study was to examine a public high school in Northeast Georgia with a lower graduation rate for special education students compared to non-disabled classmates to determine the factors impacting special education student graduation rates. In-depth interviews were used to examine the perceived relationship of the strategies and practices of special education teachers and SDT through the lens of high school graduation. Six veteran special education teachers who taught IDEA students in the general education setting were interviewed to gain an understanding of what policies, practices, and strategies they perceived to impact high school graduation. After interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded, five major themes emerged which were the IEP, Relationships, Positive Practices, and Challenges. These five themes contained the major findings of the study which were the IEP, student success, choice, relationships, consistency, evaluation, and human resources were all contributing factions to the graduation rate of IDEA students. This study may contribute to the body of research which could help educators along with policy makers better understand how to help students overcome the barriers that are believed to hinder IDEA students from graduating.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The dissertation journey has been an incredible challenge that has required perseverance and grit. I could not have completed this journey without the support and encouragement of the people who supported me through this process and I thank them all for what they have each invested in me. I would like to thank my committee for their support in pushing me to seek to understand. The guidance they have provided throughout my journey has been invaluable to me as a student and as a professional. I would like to thank Dr. John Lairsey for always being willing to provide actionable feedback that I could use to better articulate the goals and findings of my research. I am also indebted to Dr. Michael Bochenko who joined my committee in a time of need so I could continue my work and complete my degree. I would like especially to thank Dr. Bill Truby for his leadership throughout my entire degree program. He provided guidance throughout my coursework and continued to provide honest feedback even when it was hard to hear. He has taught me the process is just as important as the product and I will carry that lesson with me throughout my career. I sincerely thank all of the dedicated professionals on my committee as well as those who support them.

Finding the balance between completing a dissertation and fulfilling my professional responsibilities was difficult and I could not have done it without the support of my colleagues. Dr. Jason Branch has been a mentor to me since the beginning of my career in leadership and he has continued to invest in my growth as a leader. He has been my accountability partner throughout my studies and inspired me to further my education while developing my craft. I would also like to thank Mrs. Zoe Gattie for always believing in me and knowing exactly what to say when I needed it most. I am grateful for Ms. Suzanne Korngold for being a constant source of support for me professionally and personally.

I would like to thank my parents, Dallas and Lisa LeDuff, for always encouraging me to tend to my education. They have always guided me to do what I love and learn as much as I could. They have made sacrifices to provide the education I have received in my life and I am inspired to do the same for my children. They have shown me the value of education and have always given me an example of a strong work ethic.

Crystal is my loving wife and without her support I could not have completed this dissertation. She has been the glue that holds our family together and also my biggest cheerleader throughout this process. During my completion of this program, she has been left alone at times to care for our family and did so with grace and love. I could never give her enough credit for what she has done to walk this path with me.

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Researcher Personal and Professional Background

The researcher was raised in a middle-class family in New Orleans, Louisiana and Stone Mountain, Georgia before moving to Clemson, South Carolina to attend Clemson University. He worked as a peer mentor to students with disabilities and began to develop an interest in teaching special education while attending high school. After high school, the researcher earned a bachelor's degree in special education and became certified to teach students with disabilities in Georgia.

He began his teaching career in a diverse high school in Lilburn, Georgia where he taught students with emotional and behavioral disabilities in a self-contained environment. He was responsible for teaching math, science, social studies, and language arts to the students as well and coordinating their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) Teams and leading their IEP Team meetings. During this time in the researcher's career, he was still learning how to manage the many responsibilities of a teacher and did not fully understand how special education law and safeguards for students with disabilities fit together in practice to drive student education. After teaching students with emotional and behavioral disorders for three years, the researcher had the opportunity to create a classroom that served students on the Autism spectrum who were pursuing regular education high school diplomas.

His responsibilities included teaching students who received special education services under the Autism category as well as being the graduation coach. In this role he

was responsible for working with guidance counselors to create graduation plans for all students. Working as a graduation coach, he was able to witness the differences in education for students with and those without disabilities. During this time the researcher became interested in the educational experiences of students with disabilities and specifically how students are empowered to be accountable for their own achievement. Since that time, the researcher has continued to serve as a school administrator and remained interested in the impact that the educational environment has on the student experience.

Overview

Students with disabilities are currently graduating a rate significantly lower than students without disabilities in the United States (Digest of Education Statistics, 2019). Federal law requires that students with disabilities receive a review of their IEP at least once annually (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Reauthorization, 2004). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federal law that requires a partnership between parents and schools to ensure that students with disabilities have equal access to educational opportunities relative to their non-disabled peers (Fish, 2008). The IEP team is typically composed of the student, if he or she is of the appropriate age, and the student's service providers, including but not limited to parents, teachers, school administrators, and others who may be providing services to the student. Fish (2008) found that parents often wanted more influence in their student's IEP meetings. Special education teachers have often facilitated these meetings, and students provided little or no input into the IEP. Students and parents should be actively engaged throughout the planning process for students with disabilities in order to achieve the best outcomes

(Cavendish & Connor, 2018; Meadan et al., 2010). Mason, et al. (2004) found that students who were responsible for facilitating their IEP meetings were directly involved in developing the IEP, were more knowledgeable about their disability, had more self-confidence, and had more parent participation. In order to better understand the experience of students with disabilities in public schools, this study will explore the experiences of teachers of students with disabilities in a public high school in North East Georgia.

Statement of the Problem

When examining the relationship between parents and educators throughout the process of developing an IEP, it has been apparent that the perceived best interest of the student is the driving force in decision making (Hawbaker, 2007). Students should play an integral role in developing their IEP; however, they have rarely been involved in the IEP development in a significant way (Peters, 1990). Since self-advocacy and self-determination are associated with positive life outcomes (Hawbaker, 2007), excluding students or allowing them to exclude themselves from the IEP process can be a detriment to their post-secondary outcomes. In order to prepare students to understand and cope with their disability, they must have a strong understanding of their disability, how it affects them, and what resources are afforded to them to assist in overcoming the impact of the disability.

One problem students with disabilities are currently facing is that too many of them are entering post-secondary life with little or no understanding of their disability or how that disability may impact them in the future. Individualized Education Plans have been a requirement of the federal law under IDEA for public school students with special

needs since 1975 (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The manifestation of reform linked to IDEA includes an increase in early identification, an increase in the number of students receiving services, more students receiving access to the same curriculum as their general education peers within their local schools, an increase in graduation rate of students with disabilities, and an increase in the employment rate of students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The National Center for Education Statistics report that special education students graduated at a rate of 67.1 percent in 2017 while general education students graduated at a rate of 84.6 percent the same year (Digest of Education Statistics, 2019). Special education students continue to graduate at rates significantly lower than their general education counterparts despite federal legislative intervention. Public schools in America have been implementing IDEA for over 40 years and after the expenditure of great effort, time, and financial resources, students with disabilities still are graduating at a rate significantly lower than their classmates.

Purpose Statement

IDEA is aimed at providing students with special needs an education that is equitable to that of their general education peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). IDEA places all of the accountability for student learning on schools and teachers, but places none on the students. Students have led their IEP meetings and participated in the development of the IEP in a meaningful way with success (Mason, et al., 2004). If educators were better able to understand the experiences of special education students in public schools, it might lead to meaningful intervention that could help to close the gap in graduation rates between general education and special education students. The purpose of this study is to examine the life and educational experiences of teachers of IDEA

students at a public high school in Northeast Georgia with a significantly lower graduation rate for IDEA students compared to non-disabled classmates to determine the policies and practices impacting IDEA graduation rates.

Research Questions

The researcher used a Qualitative Design to understand the meaning that teachers assigned to the problem of special education students graduating at a lower rate than their peers. Instrumental case study methods were used to study teachers' perceptions in order for the researcher to better understand why special education students were graduating at a lower rate than their peers. The research questions below were chosen to guide the data collection and analysis of the study while also allowing the researcher to understand the case being studied through the experiences of the participants. The goal of this study was to understand the perceived factors that influenced high school graduation for IDEA students; therefore, case study methods were used to answer the following questions.

1. What are the life and educational experiences of identified special education teachers serving a public high school in Northeast Georgia with a lower graduation rate for special education students compared to non-disabled classmates?
2. What strategies and practices do identified special education teachers perceive are impacting special education student graduation rates at a public high school in Northeast Georgia with a lower graduation rate for special education students compared to non-disabled classmates?
3. What policies do identified special education teachers perceive are impacting special education student graduation rates at a public high

school in Northeast Georgia with a lower graduation rate for special education students compared to non-disabled classmates?

The questions above will guide a study to determine what barriers are perceived by students and education professionals that are causing special education students to graduate at rates significantly lower than general education students.

Significance of Study

Although there has been significant legislation and policy change since 1975, IDEA students continue to graduate at a rate far lower than their non-disabled counterparts. By understanding the student experience throughout the IEP process in a Georgia public high school with a significantly lower graduation rate for IDEA students compared to classmates, educators can begin to affect change that could lead to closing the gap in graduation rates for IDEA students. Federal law was implemented with the intent for teachers to educate students with disabilities in the same settings as their peers to the largest extent possible, yet IDEA students are still falling short of earning a high school diploma.

If the student experience is understood and taken into account, educators along with policy makers will better understand how to help students overcome the barriers that are believed to hinder IDEA students from graduating. Educators and those drafting and implementing policy should actively investigate the impact of educational decision-making on students. Every decision or policy change has consequences. In order to fully understand the impact of those consequences, it is essential that the student experience is better understood by stakeholders. By gaining a qualitative understanding of how educational decision-makers are shaping the student environment, educators and policy

makers will be able to couple qualitative data with quantitative data to capture a more complete picture of the impact of their collective decision-making.

Students should be the primary beneficiaries of the public education system. The results of this study will benefit students by informing the decision-makers who have direct control over their educational environment. Students will be better served if the day-to-day experiences of students and teachers are understood because policy will be better informed by the stakeholders who are most impacted. If educational environments can become more student-centered, school staff will be better prepared to raise their graduation rates, all of which may lead to better outcomes for the communities in which they serve. Lots of anthropomorphism still and passive voice, but let's at least correct the items I have highlighted.

Conceptual Framework

The premise for this study began with an interest in self-determination theory (SDT) and its impact on student behavior (Deci et al., 1994; Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT is a framework used to interpret forces that drive human behavior (Riley, 2016). Motivation is an impetus from within that moves an individual to behave or remain engaged in a given activity (Schreiber, 2016). The most common manifestation of SDT is intrinsic motivation, which can be influenced by external motivators (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT contains three psychological needs which are relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Relatedness is the need to feel connected to a community, while competence is the feeling that one can be successful, and autonomy is the feeling that one has choice (Yu, et al., 2018).

SDT (Deci et al., 1994; Ryan & Deci, 2000) was used to understand the perceived

barriers to high school graduation for students with learning disabilities. The theory was used to understand how school personnel interpreted school policies and practices that were perceived as barriers to high school graduation for learning disabled students. In order for students to have deep learning experiences, they must be motivated by personal growth (Lee & Turner, 2017). SDT can be used to interpret the interaction between motivation, whether internal or external, and behavior (Deci et al., 1994; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Mason, et al. (2004) outlined a framework for student-led IEP meetings that involved four steps. Although it was preferable for students to have received some type of training in self-advocacy, training was not required for students to participate in the student led IEP process (Mason, et al., 2004). They (2004) suggested that teachers should plan for four to six sessions in order to prepare students for leading their IEP. The topics to be covered with students during these sessions should include present levels of student performance, post-secondary transition, and the student's legal rights. The framework outlined by Mason, et al. (2004) could be adapted for students of different ages and disabilities.

Since 1975, students have benefited from the implementation of federal law that includes safeguards for students with special needs (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). IEPs have a large impact on the education that students with disabilities receive while in public schools in the United States. SDT as presented by Ryan and Deci (2000), reinforced the notion that students should be an integral part of the IEP planning process and should have some autonomy in the decisions that impacted the education they received, however with IDEA (2004) lawmakers placed all accountability on schools and

educators in order to facilitate all services without mandating participation from the student in a meaningful way. Mason, et al. (2004) provided one example of how to implement a process that involved students in the IEP process. Results from research on their process indicated that when students were more involved, they knew about their disability and educational rights, they were more confident, and their parents' involvement increased as well (Mason, et al., 2004).

The conceptual framework for this study is illustrated in Figure 1. Students who had been found eligible for special education and received services under the specific learning disability category would be impacted by IDEA. They have different rights afforded to them than do their non-disabled peers, including an IEP which was a guide for how the student was educated throughout her or his matriculation through the 12th grade. The presence of a disability, IDEA, and IEPs all greatly impacted the student experience, which was interpreted using self-determination theory (Deci et al.,1994; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy, relatedness, and competence described by Ryan and Deci (2000) influenced the student experience that led to high school graduation. Autonomy is an individual's need to internally organize personal experiences and use them to regulate his or her behavior (Yu, et al., 2018). Competence refers to the need for one to believe they can effectively navigate his or her environment (Yu, et al., 2018). Relatedness is an individual's need to believe they are connected to others in a meaningful way. The presence of a disability, IDEA, and IEPs shape the student experience, which was interpreted using self-determination theory (Deci et al.,1994; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

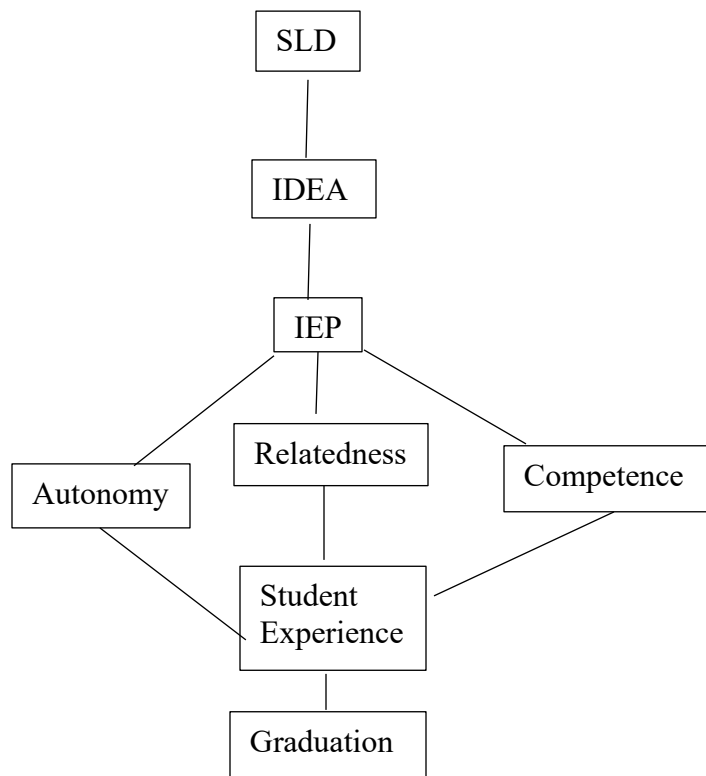


Figure 1. *Concept Map*

Methodology

Qualitative research is used to understand the processes that connect people, situations, and events (Maxwell, 2013). During this study, the researcher sought to understand the educational experiences of students with learning disabilities as they pursued a high school diploma. Qualitative research is designed to understand the meaning that people assign to a problem (Creswell, 2014). The researcher used a qualitative research design to examine the life and educational experiences of IDEA students who attended a public school district in Northeast Georgia which had a significantly lower graduation rate for IDEA students as compared to non-disabled classmates, in order to determine the barriers impacting IDEA graduation rates in a high performing school district. A case study is the examination of a bounded system (Stake,

1995). The researcher studied the experiences of students with disabilities at a school which outperformed the state in graduation rate and the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI).

Data collection occurred over several months and consisted of interviews from a variety of participants. The researcher compared data collected from multiple sources such as documents and field notes to reduce the risk of associations caused by researcher bias. Triangulating data from sources corroborated the data collected which enhanced the validity and trustworthiness of the study (Miles, et al., 2020: Stake, 1995). Purposeful sampling was used to select participants in the study. Creswell (2014) stated that sites and participants should be purposefully selected to best understand the problem and answer the research questions. The participants were two female and four male teachers. The age of the participants ranged from 37 to 43, and all of them had between 8 and 15 years of experience teaching in public schools. These individuals were selected because the researcher believed they would be able to provide rich data to answer the research questions based on their experience.

The researcher chose a site where graduation rates for regular education students as well as special education students were higher than the overall rate for the state. The site where the data was collected served approximately 1200 students and had 110 staff members. Ten percent of the student body was served in special education. The site was selected based on the district's rating being at 90 or above on the Georgia Department of Education's CCRPI.

During data analysis, the researcher recorded and transcribed each interview. Data analysis occurred throughout the collection process and included three cycles (Miles, et

al., 2020). In the first coding cycle, the researcher identified passages of interest (Maxwell, 2013). The passages were then shared with the corresponding participants to confirm they also believed the passages were important to their story. The researcher then organized the passages into participant profiles and sorted individual passages into categories by thematic connections (Seidman, 2013). During the second coding cycle, the researcher assigned codes to words, phrases, statements, and paragraphs (Miles, et al., 2020). In the final coding cycle the researcher organized the information from the second coding cycle into more meaningful patterns of data (Miles, et al., 2020).

The results of this study were used to discuss the perceived factors that influenced high school graduation for learning disabled students which are presented in Chapter 6. After careful analysis of transcripts, documents, and field notes, the researcher presented themes that were common among transcripts along with examples of those themes in each participant's own words.

Key stakeholders serving similar populations may consider the findings of this study to be applicable to their schools (Maxwell, 2013). If administrators, teachers, and policy makers reflect on what was learned from a deep analysis of this case study and how that analysis can be applied to other instances, then generalization can occur (Merriam, 2002). The researcher provided a rich and detailed description of the case in such a way that the knowledge gained from this study may be applied to a similar case (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013).

The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection in qualitative research, which makes researcher bias a threat to qualitative research (Merriam, 2002). In order to lesson the impact of biases, the researcher identified and recorded how his

personal biases may be shaping the data collection and analysis. In the researcher's previous experience with IDEA students, he learned that their ability to navigate school successfully while coping with their disability varied. This inspired the researcher to study the perceived factors that influenced graduation for IDEA students. In order to respond to biases, the researcher used memos created throughout the study to identify any assumptions that could have shaped data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2002).

Limitations

Qualitative research methods allow the researcher to focus on the complexity of a specific case (Stake, 1995). One limitation of the study was researcher bias. As the instrument of research, the researcher has biases that might have had an effect on the study (Merriam, 2002). As a veteran educator, the author has personal views and opinions about teacher and student experiences. In order to identify quickly researcher bias and respond appropriately, the researcher made reflective notes after interviews and observations to ensure the separation of bias and interpretation to the largest extent possible. The second limitation is the purposeful selection of the site. Qualitative researchers may purposefully select the site or participants to best understand the problem and answer the research questions (Creswell, 2014). The site was selected based on the schools performance on the CCRPI. The researcher only studied one school in Northeast Georgia with a unique community and resource pool. The findings may not be readily transferable to other schools.

Definition of Terms

Autonomy. This is the belief that one has the ability to choose to engage in a particular behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI). The Georgia Department of education uses the CCRPI to rate schools and school districts on school improvement, accountability, and college and career readiness for all Georgia public school students (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). For this study the CCRPI was used to select a site.

Competency. This is the belief that one has the skills necessary to choose the behavior that will lead to a desired outcome (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

High Performing School. This is defined school that is ranked in the top 25% of all schools on the Georgia Department of Education's CCRPI.

Individualized Education Plan. This is a document outlining education services and supports for a student with a disability.

Learning Disability. A learning disability is disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations. For this study, students were purposefully selected as having met the criteria to have a learning disability.

Relatedness. This is the need to feel connected to other people or a greater community in a meaningful way (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Self determination theory. This is a theory of human growth and development used to interpret human behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Chapter Summary

This study addressed the experiences of high school students with learning disabilities and school personnel that work with them. In the United States, federal law

has been implemented for over 40 years to close the gap between special education and general education graduation rates. Despite the additional resources directed toward special education during that time, students with disabilities are still graduating at a significantly lower rate than their classmates. The purpose of this study was to examine the life and educational experiences of teachers of IDEA students attending a public high school in Northeast Georgia with a significantly lower graduation rate for IDEA students compared to their non-disabled classmates in order to determine the barriers impacting IDEA graduation rates. If the experiences of special education students and teachers were better understood by key stakeholders, additional intervention could be implemented that could lead to closing the gap in graduation rates between general education and special education students. Students are the centerpiece of public education in America. The results of this study will benefit students and teacher by informing the decision-makers who could augment educational processes and environments in public schools.

The conceptual framework for this study included special education students, IDEA, IEP's and Self Determination Theory. Students who received special education services under the specific learning disability category were be impacted by IDEA. Under IDEA, they had different rights relative to their peers including an IEP which was a plan for how the student would receive an individualized educational program through the 12th grade. Learning disabilities, IDEA, and IEPs shaped the student and teacher experience, which was interpreted using self-determination theory (Deci et al.,1994; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Case study methods were used to guide the understanding of the lives and educational experiences of the participants in this study. Data collection and analysis occurred over several months and involved interviews from a variety of participants as

well as document review. Multiple sources of data were collected and analyzed to reduce researcher bias to the greatest extent that could be achieved. Triangulating data from several sources allowed the researcher to verify the interpretation the data collected which enhanced the validity and trustworthiness of the study (Stake, 1995; Miles, et al., 2020). The findings of this study may inform educators and policy makers on how to improve the graduation rate of students with learning disabilities.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Statement of the Problem

When examining the relationship between parents and educators throughout the process of developing an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), Hawbaker (2007) stated it was usually apparent that the perceived best interest of the student is the driving force in decision making. Peters (1990) stated that students should play an integral role in developing their own IEP; however, they are rarely involved in the IEP development in a significant way. Connor and Cavendish (2018) reported that the partnership between students, parents and school personnel was still an area of needed improvement in IEP development and implementation. Self-advocacy and self-determination are associated with positive life outcomes. Excluding students or allowing them to exclude themselves from the IEP process could be a detriment to their post-secondary outcomes.

Public schools in America have been implementing the IDEA since 1975. After the expenditure of great effort, time, and financial resources, students with disabilities are still graduating at a rate significantly lower than their classmates. In order to better prepare students to understand and cope with their disability, they must have a strong understanding of how their disability affects them and how to mitigate the impact of that disability.

Purpose

Students with disabilities have often been perceived by stakeholders as the beneficiaries of special services because there is something wrong with them that is out of their control. This perception has led stakeholders to feel as if they need to help or protect these students. All over the United States, there are students who have led their IEP meetings and played an integral role in the development of the IEP (Mason, et al., 2004). In contrast, Cavendish and Connor (2018) reported that researchers have found an overall lack of student leadership in their respective IEP meetings. The purpose of this study is to examine the life and educational experiences of teachers of IDEA students attending a public high school in Northeast Georgia with a significantly lower graduation rate for IDEA students compared to non-disabled classmates in order to determine the barriers impacting IDEA graduation rates.

Research Questions

1. What are the life and educational experiences of identified IDEA students attending a public high school in Northeast Georgia with a significantly lower graduation rate for IDEA students compared to non-disabled classmates?
2. What barriers do identified IDEA students perceive are reducing IDEA student graduation rates at a public high school in Northeast Georgia with a significantly lower graduation rate for IDEA students compared to non-disabled classmates?
3. What school policies and practices do school personnel participating in the IDEA process perceive are impacting student graduation rates at a public high school in Northeast Georgia with a significantly lower graduation rate for

IDEA students compared to non-disabled classmates?

Introduction

Federal law (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004) included the requirement that students with disabilities receive a review of their IEP at least once annually. A partnership between parents and schools to ensure that students with disabilities have equal access to educational opportunities relative to their non-disabled peers was an integral part of IDEA (Fish, 2008). The IEP team was typically made up of the student, if he or she was of the appropriate age, and the student's service providers, including but not limited to parents, teachers, school administrators, and others who may have been providing services to the student. This could be a stressful process for teachers, students, and parents. Everyone was emotionally involved in the process and constantly wondering if they were truly creating the best plan for the student. Fish (2008) found that parents often wanted more influence in their student's IEP meetings. Cavendish and Connor (2018) found that special education teachers often facilitated IEP meetings, while students provided little input into the IEP. Mason, et al. (2004) found that students who were responsible for facilitating their IEP meetings were directly involved in developing the IEP, were more knowledgeable about their disability, had more self-confidence, and had more parent participation. This is an interesting notion, considering that researchers have found that students should be participating in their IEP meeting in more meaningful ways (Connor & Cavendish, 2018; Peters, 1990). If educators trained students to advocate for themselves throughout the IEP process, it might lead to more positive student outcomes. A review of literature will outline the theoretical basis of student-led IEP meetings, present the primary function of the IEP, provide a framework for student-

led IEP meetings, and provide suggestions for more meaningful educational experiences for students with disabilities.

Conceptual Framework

The theoretical underpinning of this study was Self Determination Theory. In order to become self-determined, someone would have to have three psychological needs met, which are relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Autonomy describes one's needs to internally organize personal experiences and use them to regulate his or her behavior (Yu, et al., 2018). Competence refers to the need for one to believe they can effectively navigate his or her environment (Yu, et al., 2018). Yu, et al. (2018) described relatedness as the need to believe one is connected to others in a meaningful way. Students who had been found eligible for special education and received services under the specific learning disability category would be impacted by IDEA. They have different rights afforded to them than do their non-disabled peers, including an IEP which was a guide for how the student was educated throughout her or his matriculation through the 12th grade. The presence of a disability, IDEA, and IEPs all greatly impacted the student experience, which was interpreted using self-determination theory (Deci et al.,1994; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy, relatedness, and competence described by Ryan and Deci (2000) influenced the student experience that led to high school graduation.

Public Education

In the 1950s, Americans expected the ills of society to be solved by the education system. As the economy of the United States grew drastically in the 1950s, so did the American public education system. Student enrollment increased at the elementary and secondary levels and students attended school with the expectation of earning a high

school diploma (Bankston & Caldas, 2009). Public education was viewed as being imperative for the defense of the United States during the Cold War (Bankston & Caldas, 2009). On August 22, 1958, the United States Congress passed the National Defense Education Act, which was the first time that federal money was directed to American secondary schools (McAndrews, 2014).

President Kennedy and President Johnson continued this investment in education, although the focus had changed from defense to equal opportunities for disenfranchised groups of Americans (Altenbaugh, 2003). It was widely believed by many during this time that equal opportunities in schooling were the pathways out of poverty (Bankston & Caldas, 2009). Through his legislative agenda, President Kennedy launched a program to distribute food to the poor, which would later grow into the Federal Free and Reduced Lunch program found in American schools today. President Kennedy also fought to expand the Aid to Families of Dependent Children to include children living in poverty (Bankston & Caldas, 2009). After Kennedy's death, President Johnson continued to level the playing field of educational opportunities by working with Congress to pass the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which provided federal funding to schools for the purpose of improving the academic performance of the disadvantaged (Colker, 2013). It was during this era that legislators and policy makers began to view education as the means to lift up the most disadvantaged and disenfranchised Americans so that they could achieve the "American Dream" (Bankston & Caldas, 2009). This perspective on education would continue in the Reagan Administration (NCEE, 1983).

In their report, "A Nation at Risk," The National Commission on Excellence in Education declared that all Americans had the right to an education (NCEE, 1983). The

Commission believed that this free and democratic society could not be maintained without an accessible education by U.S. citizens. The report also contained evidence related to American educational performance, such as a lack of literacy among adults, a decline in scores on standardized tests such as the SAT, and a decline in science achievement scores (NCEE, 1983). Members of the commission wrote that the nation's teachers were unprepared to teach an effective curriculum, which resulted in low academic standards across the country (Altenbaugh, 2003). The authors of the report, described by President Reagan as an open letter to the American people, ultimately determined education should be the nation's top priority (NCEE, 1983). The grim view of the commission prompted President George H. W. Bush to create a list of national education goals that were subsequently passed into law titled Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994. Among other targets, Goals 2000 included a national graduation rate of 90 percent (Bankston & Caldas, 2009). The extraordinary burden placed on schools as a result of this legislation only would continue with further legislation, such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (2002).

Almost immediately after entering the presidency in January 2001, President George W. Bush announced an educational reform program intended to (in his words) “express my deep belief in our public schools to and their mission to build the mind and character of every child, from every background, in every part of America” (Bankston & Caldas, 2009, p. 146). This educational reform was NCLB passed into law in 2001 (Bankston & Caldas, 2009). The bill not only reauthorized The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Hurder, 2014), but was also a logical progression from President George H. W. Bush's failed Goals 2000 plan (Bankston & Caldas, 2009). The

authors of NCLB focused on closing the achievement gaps of underperforming groups by setting performance targets for all students (Hurder, 2014). They believed that schools should provide equity on a common performance scale for all groups of students including those served in special education (Bankston & Caldas, 2009). President Bush created The President's Commission on Special Education, which reported the need to implement accountability measures to ensure students with disabilities were closing the achievement gap (Kauffman, 2004).

Despite the efforts made by politicians and legislators, there continued to be a large discrepancy between the special education graduation rate and the general education graduation rate in the United States (Dragoo, 2018). The Digest of Education Statistics (2019) listed the graduation rate of students with disabilities as 67% in 2018, while the rate for all students was 85% for that same year. The outcomes in Georgia were similar in 2019, with rates of 82.6% and 62.9% for all students and students with disabilities, respectively (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). Graduation rates of all student including those with disabilities have improved in recent decades with legislative intervention, but there continued to be a difference on average of roughly 20% between students served in special education and all other students (Johnson et al., 2019).

Special Education

The education of students with disabilities was drastically different in modern times than it was during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Jeynes, 2007). Individuals with disabilities were not considered to be able to contribute to society (Torres & Barber, 2017). During the early twentieth century, American people still had limited understanding of how the brain functioned and what factors caused an individual

to have special needs (Jeynes, 2007). In the early 1800s, individuals with disabilities were generally cared for by their families without government assistance of any kind. Most people with disabilities continued to be excluded from educational opportunities into the early 1900s (Neuhaus, et al., 2014). That common practice was challenged by S. G. Howe in a report commissioned by the Governor of Massachusetts in which he recommended that a school be formed to serve their citizens with special needs (Howe, 1848). Howe indicated that a significant portion of the approximately 1500 individuals in Massachusetts with disabilities would benefit from formal schooling (Winzer, 2014). Howe's report led to the formation of the "Massachusetts School for Idiotic and Feeble-minded Youth" which was the first school for children with disabilities in the United States (Rotatori, et al. 2011).

Although Howe's (1848) report had certainly made an impact for students with disabilities in Massachusetts, it was not until politically powerful people such as John F. Kennedy became involved that people would begin to recognize the need for federal law with regard to the rights of people with disabilities (Rotatori, et al., 2011). President John F. Kennedy used his influence to expand the role of the federal government in developing special education policy and oversight (Hardman, 2006). The Kennedy family's support of people with disabilities led President John F. Kennedy to establish The President's Panel on Mental Retardation, which found that state organizations charged with caring for people with disabilities were overcrowded and inconsistent in the quality of care they provided (Rotatori, et al., 2011). The Panel recommended research and funding to improve the areas of education, healthcare, and legal rights for people with disabilities (Hanley-Maxwell & Collet-Klingenberg, 2011). President Kennedy's administration

responded to the findings by signing PL 88-164 into law in 1963, which allocated federal dollars to build mental health facilities and grant money that would be made available to clinical organizations that served individuals with mental disabilities for construction of facilities and training of staff (Stathis, 2014). The legislators who authored PL 88-164 did not mandate that people with disabilities receive a public education; however, it was a major step toward federal assistance for the disabled population (Rotatori, et al., 2011).

President Kennedy's passion for government intervention for disenfranchised Americans culminated after his death with the passage of The Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Rotatori, et al., 2011). A key component of The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the prohibition of discrimination in public places. The Civil Rights Act made it illegal to segregate schools and to discriminate in federally funded projects (Stathis, 2014). This was significant for individuals with disabilities because while it did not specifically address education for those with special needs, it did address the equity of public places and services for these individuals (Rotatori, et al., 2011). Landmark Supreme Court cases such as *Brown v. Board of Education* and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, caused the general public to question why the principles of equality that had been laid out in Supreme Court decisions and the Constitution were not applied to the education of students with disabilities. These paved the way for others to challenge the courts to answer that very question (Herzik, 2015).

Legal Precedents

Brown v. The Board of Education (1954) was decided in the Supreme Court of the United States in regard to an African-American student seeking admittance into a public school serving only white students. The primary question of the case was whether

or not African-American students could attend the schools in their communities with white students and not be forced to attend segregated schools. At the time of the decision, the widely applied legal precedent was “separate but equal,” which was derived from *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) in which the courts ruled that students of different races could attend separate schools as long the schools had equivalent resources (Wiggins & Wilson, 2013). The plaintiffs in the case argued that the public schools were not equal and could not be made equal. The Supreme Court of The United States ultimately decided that public education had changed drastically in practice and in purpose since *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), therefore segregation on the basis of race did not afford minority students equal educational opportunities.

The U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia went a step further in the decision of *Hobson v. Hansen* (1967). The primary question in this case was whether the Superintendent and Board of Education in the District Columbia discriminated against poor and minority students with the use of testing and ability tracking. The main argument by the plaintiff was that the school system in the District of Columbia was discriminating against poor and minority students and by placing pupils who performed poorly on aptitude test into classes with an inferior curriculum (*Hobson v. Hansen*, 1967). The judge in the case ruled that the practices of the school system were discriminatory regardless of their intent. McPherson (2010) wrote that the decision ended tracking practices in the District of Columbia that violated the 14th Amendment rights of poor and minority students.

A similar case was brought in California challenging the placement of African American students in separate classes using an intelligence test given to them during

elementary school. The U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California heard the case of *Larry P. v. Riles* (1972), in which the plaintiff challenged the separate placement by arguing the test used to place students was culturally biased. Due to the results of the given test, the plaintiff was determined to be mentally retarded and placed in a self-contained special education classroom (Wiggins & Wilson, 2013). The court ruled in favor of the plaintiff and decided that the test was culturally biased and subsequently prohibited the school system from using the test score as the sole source of data when placing students in special education in future cases (Wiggins & Wilson, 2013).

In the case of the *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1972), plaintiffs argued that their children were being discriminated against by being denied a public education due to their scores on entrance exams. The school district denied them access to school based on their inability to demonstrate certain skills deemed necessary for entry by the school district (Wiggins & Wilson, 2013). The basis of the plaintiffs' argument to the court was a failure to provide due process and a violation of equal protection under the 14th Amendment. The courts ruled in favor of the plaintiff requiring the school district to provide education to all school aged children, including those with disabilities regardless of ability level (*Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, 1972).

The *Board of Education of the Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Amy Rowley* was a case that made it to the Supreme Court of the United States and defined the meaning of free and appropriate public education according to the courts (Yell, et al.,

2007). Amy Rowley was a student who was deaf in the Hendrick Hudson School District that wanted the district to provide a sign language interpreter so she that could understand the teacher in the classroom (Mead & Paige, 2008). The district argued the services given to her were sufficient because they included speech therapy, sound amplifier, and a deaf and hard of hearing teacher while Amy's parents argued that even with those services, Amy could only understand a small percentage of what the teacher was saying. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of the school district in the case, saying that the school had provided an appropriate education for Amy (Mead & Paige, 2008). This case was important because it gave the courts an opportunity to interpret The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) which "defined a FAPE as special education and related services that

- (A) are provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge,
 - (B) meet standards of the State educational agency,
 - (C) include an appropriate preschool, elementary, or secondary school education in the state involved, and
 - (D) are provided in conformity with the individualized education program.
- (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1401(a)(18))" (Yell, et al., 2007, p. 2).

The court majority opinion was that the school district followed the procedures set forth in the law in order to ensure a free and appropriate public education and provided the services necessary to give the student the opportunity to learn (Mead & Paige, 2008).

IDEA

In the years following the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, several cases spanning many states would affirm students with disabilities right to education. Colker (2013) and Herzik (2015) wrote that cases such as *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* and *Mills v. DC Board of Education* caused law makers to pass legislation that guaranteed every child would have access to a public education. These cases would eventually lead the passage of federal law PL 94-142, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) (Rotatori, et al., 2011). Prior to 1975, Congress found that more than four million students with disabilities were not receiving an adequate education (Yell, et al., 2007). Legislators used EAHCA to require public schools to educate all students with disabilities between the ages of three and twenty-one (Swafford, 2018). EAHCA has been through several reauthorizations and is currently known today as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. IDEA had several key components and any student who met the eligibility requirements was entitled to the services afforded under the law (Swafford, 2018). The first component of IDEA was what is commonly referred to as child find. Child find mandated that local education agencies were responsible for identifying and evaluating students with disabilities. School districts were also responsible for providing all students with disabilities a free and appropriate public education (FAPE), which meant that students could not be excluded from school based on their disability (Zukauskas, 2019). The second component of IDEA was what was known as nondiscriminatory identification and assessment (Rotatori, et al., 2011). Students who might have a disability should be identified and assessed by trained professionals (Ennis, et al., 2017). This assessment may then be used

to determine whether or not the student is eligible to receive special education service (Rotatori, et al., 2011).

Once a student was determined to be eligible to receive special education services, the school was required to develop an IEP for that student (Hurder, 2014). The IEP was a document which consisted of the student's current level of performance, strengths, weaknesses, goals, and special services that the student would receive in school. The IEP must be developed by a team of individuals who served the student, including but not limited to regular education teachers, special education teachers, parents, and someone representing the local education agency or school (Hurder, 2014). This team was required to meet at least once per year to review that student's IEP and make any necessary changes (Hurder, 2014). It was specified in IDEA that the services detailed in the IEP must be provided in the least restrictive environment (LRE), meaning that the student must be served in the general education setting to the greatest extent possible (Rotatori, et al., 2011). The ultimate placement of a student was determined by the student's IEP team and it was specified in IDEA that this decision might not be made before that team had an opportunity to review all relevant information (Rotatori, et al., 2011).

Individualized Education Plans

Individualized Education Plans have been a requirement of the federal law under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for public school students with special needs since 1975 (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The U.S. Department of Education (2010) stated the purpose of special education was to provide specialized instruction and intervention to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Some

examples of special education seen throughout public school classrooms in the United States were reading interventions, behavior interventions, separate classes, inclusion classes, and early childhood interventions. Since the implementation of federal law-making provisions for students with special needs, the public school population has experienced improved outcomes for students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

Prior to the implementation of IDEA, individuals with disabilities were often excluded from the school setting. Many lived in state-funded institutions where they were given minimal care. In the early 1970s only one in five children with a disability was provided education in the local school. Many students were excluded from school because they were deaf, blind, emotionally disturbed, or mentally retarded. In years prior to 1975 students with disabilities were not provided an opportunity to receive an appropriate education, and were often excluded from joining the workforce (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

Since the enactment of IDEA, the number of occurrences in children who received interventions that mitigated the effects of their disability has increased. The manifestation of reform linked to IDEA included an increase in early identification, an increase in the number of students receiving services, more students receiving access to the same curriculum as their general education peers within their local schools, an increase in graduation rate of students with disabilities, and an increase in the employment rate of students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

While IDEA has been beneficial to students with disabilities, they have also been faced with challenges as a result of IDEA implementation. For many years schools have

been required to include students with special needs in the general education setting to the largest extent possible, while also subjecting them to high stakes testing that carries significant implications about promotion and retention (Lee-Tarver, 2006). The IEP served as not only a plan to guide stakeholders in developing a framework of support for students with disabilities, but also was a way of documenting their progress towards achievement along the way (Kaye & Aserlind, 1979). The plan itself included the student's present levels of performance in the educational setting, including behavioral and adaptive skills, goals and objectives, related services that the student might need to be served in their LRE, any accommodations the student would need to access the curriculum, and criteria for evaluation of the student's progress (Kaye & Aserlind, 1979). In order to document the progress made or lack thereof, students, parents, teachers, and administrators had to work together to gather the data needed to evaluate and revise the plan frequently (Kaye & Aserlind, 1979).

In order for an IEP to be successful, the author of the document must first provide the context in which the child would be served (Lee-Tarver, 2006). Lee-Tarver (2006) explained this was done by describing the effect that the disability had on the student and the extent to which the child cannot participate in the general education setting. Before the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, the development of the IEP was considered to be the responsibility of the special education teacher (Lee-Tarver, 2006). Since the latest reauthorization of IDEA, the IEP was the responsibility of a team of individuals, to include all stakeholders who served the student as part of the IEP (Lee-Tarver, 2006).

Perceptions of the Individualized Education Plan

The charge for special education students to be included with their general education peers resulted in a relationship between educators' attitudes towards inclusion of students with disabilities and the acceptance of their non-disabled peers (Lee-Tarver, 2006). Historically, there have been studies that have documented that teachers were averse to including special education students in their classrooms (Cook, 2001; Cook, et al., 1999; Cook, et al., 2002; Frodin, et al., 1996). Hettiaarachi et al. (2018) wrote that this reluctance has continued into recent years and is exacerbated by the lack of training available to general education teachers ~~on~~ about inclusive education. Lee-Tarver (2006) cited several studies that listed factors that contributed to teacher attitudes toward including special education students as teacher experience, gender, and whether the teacher had ever taught in a special education classroom. Another study cited by Lee-Tarver (2006) appeared to show a spike in stress levels of teachers who were asked to integrate a student with a disability into their general education classroom. Teachers and administrators have generally supported the idea of inclusion; however, Cook, et al. (1999) found that teachers and administrators did not always reflect that support in practice. Gaines and Barnes (2017) found that teachers depended on school leaders to provide professional development opportunities in the area of special education inclusion to improve teacher efficacy which reduced stress levels of teachers. The discrepancy between the intent of the theory behind special education inclusion and the practice of special education has hindered students with disabilities from being able to obtain an educational experience that was equivalent to that of their non-disabled peers (Lee-Tarver, 2006).

Lee-Tarver (2006) conducted a study in which 123 regular education teachers were administered a survey. The survey consisted of demographic information and 16 questions regarding teacher perceptions of IEPs for current students. Of the 16 questions, four of them targeted the efficiency of IEPs, five of them were aimed at assessing the impact of IEPs on instruction and the ability of the general education teacher's ability to plan, and 7 were targeted toward assessing the general education teacher's role in developing and implementing IEPs for their students. Although Lee-Tarver (2006) discussed an improvement in overall teacher perception of students with IEPs, there was still a significant number of general education teachers that have negative feelings toward the IEP as a plan and as a process as seen in Table 1 below (Lee-Tarver, 2006, pp. 265-268).

Table 1

Teacher Responses to Questionnaire

| Item | Percentages | | | |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| IEP goals and objectives provide a curriculum for my students. | 15.4% | 48% | 21% | 4.9% |
| Choosing IEP goals and objectives from lists help to sequence my instructional objectives. | 8.9% | 48% | 26% | 3.3% |
| IEP goals and objectives are more program specific than student specific. | 8.1% | 30.9% | 39% | 6.5% |
| The IEP serves as a tool in evaluating the child's program and services. | 10.6% | 61% | 14.6% | 3.3% |
| The IEP helps me to organize and structure my teaching better. | 12.2% | 51.2% | 22.8% | 3.3% |
| I feel I am a better teacher because I have the IEP to guide my instructional planning. | 12.2% | 39.8% | 31.7% | 4.9% |

| Item | Percentages | | | |
|---|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| I use IEP goals and objectives to plan instructional activities. | 13% | 52% | 19.5% | 3.3% |
| Using lists of IEP goals and objectives would give me more time for teaching. | 5.7% | 52% | 26.8% | 1.6% |
| IEPs are so valuable all students should have them. | 3.3% | 17.9% | 44.7% | 23.6 |
| The time spent on developing the IEP does not justify its worth. | 4.1% | 22.8% | 44.7% | 15.4% |
| Once the IEP is developed I don't look at it again. | 4.9% | 10.6% | 48% | 24.4% |
| The only part of the IEP that is a team decision is placement. | 3.3% | 21.1% | 46.3% | 16.3% |
| The only part of the IEP that is a team decision is service delivery. | 4.1% | 18.7% | 45.5% | 17.1% |
| I help to choose IEP goals for my students. | 13% | 35.8% | 25.2% | 13.8% |
| No part of the IEP is a team decision. | 3.3% | 15.4% | 47.2% | 22.8% |
| The data shared at IEP meetings helped me develop goals and objectives. | 16.3% | 44.7% | 21.1% | 5.7% |

Are individualized education plans a good thing? A survey of teachers' perceptions of the utility of IEPs in regular education settings.

Hedges et al. (2014) conducted a qualitative analysis in which focus groups were used for the purpose of informing the development and implementation of an intervention for adolescents with Autism. Before conducting the analysis, Hedges et al. (2014) reviewed literature that supported the claim that students with Autism had negative outcomes due to a need for support at school and the lack of services available to them. The researchers facilitated focus group discussions for the purpose of gaining insight into the experiences of high school students with Autism with regard to their educational

experience. A total of 41 participants were involved in seven focus groups that included students, service providers, and community members. The study found three emerging themes, which were inconsistencies, difficulty with interpersonal connections, and knowledge process breakdowns. One frustration expressed by educators and parents was the lack of consistency during transition years. They commented that students in high school should already have a plan that worked and that plan should have been communicated to the students' teachers. They reported feeling as if they were starting over every year. The study revealed that one of the processes that acted as a barrier was the IEP process, because it was difficult to navigate the process and the IEP itself was sometimes written too broadly. Some participants shared the perception that although IEPs were developed, they were not implemented properly. Part of this perception may be due to the participants' report that while there were clear expectations, there was not an identified network of support and resources to meet those expectations. Ultimately, Hedges et al. (2014) found that there was a large disparity between the educational service actually being provided to students with Autism and their educational needs.

Involving students in decisions concerning their educational outcomes increased their achievement and positive school outcomes (Cavendish, 2013). Cavendish (2013) used quantitative methods to analyze the relationship between student perceptions of school commitment, their involvement in decision-making, and their progress toward graduating with their general education peers who began school at the same time. The researcher found that student perception of school commitment and student involvement in educational decision-making were both significant factors in predicting the odds of a student with a disability being on track for graduation. The research put forth by

Cavendish (2013) supported the notion that involving students in educational planning could lead to improved outcomes for all students. Educational research suggested that education was the responsibility of everyone, including students (Hands, 2014). Schools must take on the responsibility for engaging stakeholders in decision-making processes, because the likelihood of opposition increased when stakeholders were excluded. When considering the students as stakeholders, their opposition could manifest itself in disengagement from school and learning activities (Hands, 2014).

Caldwell (2010) explored leadership development through the life experiences of individuals. A grounded theory design was used in which the researcher examined the life stories of 13 leaders with disabilities in the United States. For sampling purposes, leader was defined as someone who had been an elected official within the self-advocacy movement at the local, state, or national level. The sample of leaders participated in 12 interviews over the course of the study. After each interview the researcher wrote memos that identified themes and made notes to follow up on areas of interest. The findings indicated four themes in the leadership development process, which were disability oppression and resistance, environmental supports and relationships, leadership skills, and advanced leadership opportunities. Caldwell (2010) was particularly concerned with the theme of environmental supports. Participants reported that in order to be an advocate or a leader it was necessary to have access to supports such as advisors, others with disabilities, and leadership development. Participants discussed that a lack of access to these supports could be a cause of the lack of leadership development within some individuals (Caldwell, 2010).

Impact of Teacher Practice on Student Achievement

One of the most difficult tasks of supporting students with special needs is individualizing their instruction (McMaster et al., 2019). Many at-risk students have benefited from standard research-based interventions, however many students, particularly those with disabilities, have not (McMaster et al., 2019). Fuchs, et al. (2010) asserted that students with disabilities may require more frequent and more individualized instruction in order to make significant academic gains. Since the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, tiered systems of supports have gained prominence as frameworks to identify students who may need more intensive interventions in order to support their academic needs (Arden et al., 2017).

Many schools across the United States have implemented a Response to Intervention (RTI) framework as a means to identify students with special needs and to address those needs with targeted interventions (Vaughn & Fletcher, 2012). RTI has been proven to improve the outcomes of students with additional academic and social needs (Arden et al., 2017; Schumacher, et al., 2017; Vaughn & Swanson, 2015). The RTI framework was a protocol for educators to analyze student performance data, identify skill deficits, and apply interventions to address those deficits (King & Coughlin, 2016). The RTI framework must be built on a solid foundation of high-quality teaching of research-validated instructional practices in order to be effective (Poon-McBrayer, 2018). RTI has been proven effective when implemented with fidelity, but there should be special attention given to the implementation of the framework to ensure that students could make the appropriate academic gains (Buffum, et al., 2018).

Self Determination Theory

Self determination theory is a framework of human motivation that pertains to human growth and development and personal needs (Riley, 2016). Hamdi (2018) wrote that motivation was a force that drove one to behave in such a way as to reach his or her goals. SDT was based in the investigation of growth patterns and needs to determine what motivated an individual (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ryan and Deci (2000) identified three psychological needs related to SDT, which are relatedness, competence, and autonomy. In order for an individual to grow and develop appropriately, these needs must be met. SDT theorists were not only concerned with internal developmental concerns, but also the environmental factors that might hinder the development of the individual. The most common manifestation of SDT was intrinsic motivation, followed by the impact of extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Motivation has been described as energy that resulted in direction and persistence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Schreiber (2016) defined motivation as an internal impetus that moved one to act and kept him or her engaged in a particular activity. Motivation was highly valued by those in supervisory roles, because it was perceived as the cause of action, and therefore results (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Students who are more motivated are more likely to attain their educational goals (Covington, 2000). Lee and Turner (2017) stated that a student's motivation for personal learning was essential for a deep learning experience. Individuals may be motivated by a number of different things including a desire to make a change, enjoyment of an activity, or having a vested interest of some kind. People were also sometimes motivated by external factors such as fear of the boss, or the reward of a paycheck (Ryan & Deci, 2000). No matter the reason, motivation was

a significant factor in every culture because it was used to interpret the behavior of individuals (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When comparing individuals who were motivated by external factors to those who were motivated by internal desires, it was believed that the latter group achieved more positive outcomes than the former because extrinsic motivation was believed to have the potential to impede intrinsic motivation (Hamdi, 2018). Ryan and Deci (2000) stated that SDT was concerned with differentiating the types of motivation so they could be identified at a given moment in time. There were several different types of motivation identified within SDT which all have a specific impact on learning, performance and personal experience (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Intrinsic motivation was described as acting because one simply wanted to act. It was the innate predisposition to discover the unknown, challenge oneself, and to learn because one did not know something (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsically motivated students are likely to achieve positive educational outcomes (Cerasoli et al., 2014). Cameron and Pierce (2002) defined intrinsic motivation as behaviors that did not result in a reward other than the behavior itself. Ryan and Deci (2000) used the example of a child to describe intrinsic motivation. Children were often playful, curious, and active without the motivation of any type of external reward. Although this implies that humans are born with the trait of intrinsic motivation, Ryan and Deci (2000) also recognized the external environment must be suited to nurture this trait. Extrinsic motivation was used to describe behaviors that were closely associated with an external consequence (Cameron & Pierce, 2002). Since intrinsic motivation was considered to be naturally occurring, SDT was a theory about the way in which the external conditions facilitated the occurrence of intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Cognitive evaluation theory (CET), a sub theory of SDT, focused on explaining the variance of intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The theoretical basis of CET was that because the nature of intrinsic motivation was inherent, this meant that the variance was caused by external factors that either promoted or conversely, mitigated that motivation. CET theorists focused on autonomy, relatedness, and competence and specified that all three must be present in order to help facilitate intrinsic motivation (Yu, et al., 2018). Yu, et al. (2018) stated autonomy described one's needs to internally organize personal experiences and used them to regulate his or her behavior. Competence refers to the need to feel like one can effectively navigate his or her environment (Yu, et al., 2018). According to CET, individuals must feel competent and perceived that their actions were self-directed in order to nurture intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Extrinsic motivators had the greatest potential to undermine intrinsic motivation (Riley, 2016). Ryan and Deci (2000) also alleged externally motivating factors such as tangible rewards, threats, deadlines, and directives hindered intrinsic motivation due to the perception of causality. Riley (2016) wrote that rewarding an individual for a behavior that they would have exhibited without an external reward could have a negative impact on future creativity and performance of the same behavior. Relative to education, studies had reliably supported the notion that teachers who facilitated autonomy in their classrooms, experienced greater intrinsic motivation from their students (Ryan & Deci, 2000). On the contrary, teachers who used a directorial approach, experienced students who are more likely to lose interest and disengage with their classroom. Other than competence and autonomy, relatedness was also a contributing factor of intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Yu, et al. (2018) described relatedness as the need to

feel connected to others in a meaningful way. While competence and autonomy would help to facilitate intrinsic motivation, their effects were intensified by the feeling of relatedness or belonging to a community, group, or team (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ryan and Deci (2000) again used the example of a child to illustrate this phenomenon. They pointed out that an infant's curiosity and willingness to explore was intensified when the infant was close to his or her mother. The same feeling of security that an infant experienced when near his or her mother could be present in the context of interpersonal relationships that individuals experienced throughout life and could help to facilitate intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Environments in which autonomy, relatedness, and competence pervasively interacted with individual behavior would produce the most intrinsically social context (Yu, et al., 2018).

There are other types of motivations that became increasingly relevant as humans matriculated through childhood, and social environments played a larger role in affecting motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Many of these motivations fell into the category of extrinsic motivation which Ryan and Deci (2000) defined as a function of performance in which the performer was seeking an external outcome. Extrinsic motivation occurred when behavior was demonstrated due to the existence of external factors such as rewards, punishments, deadlines, and praise (Hamdi, 2018). Extrinsic motivation could also be autonomous in spite of the contrast with intrinsic motivation. Ryan and Deci (2000) offered the example of two students completing their homework. One student was motivated to complete the assignment because she or he perceived it as a valuable learning opportunity that would help them in their career while the other was motivated by the regulation of the teacher. The first student chose to complete the assignment

because it would help in the future while the second student was simply complying with a request. In the case of the first student, autonomy was present even though the motivation was still extrinsic.

Ryan and Deci (2000) also discussed a second sub theory, organismic integration theory (OIT), which considered the different types of extrinsic motivation and the environmental factors that facilitated or conversely mitigated the internalization of motivation. The types of motivation were displayed on a continuum in Figure 2 (Ryan & Deci, 2000). On the left of the continuum was a motivation or the lack of the intent to act. This was a result of not believing that one was capable, or that one would not achieve the desired results. Next on the continuum were the extrinsically motivated behavior categories. The category that was the least autonomous was the externally regulated category. Behaviors in this category were the result of the promise of an external reward. The next category on the continuum was introjected regulation. Introjected regulation was similar to external regulation except it involved a reward of self-esteem rather than an external reward. These behaviors were motivated by a boost in ego or the avoidance of guilt. A more autonomous category than introjected regulation was called identified regulation. In this category, behaviors were motivated by a goal that the individual had identified as personally important. The final category of extrinsically motivated behaviors on the continuum was integrated regulation. Behaviors in this category were the most autonomous and were the result of reconciling the identified outcomes of the behavior with one's own personal beliefs and values. On the far right of the continuum and the category containing the most self-determined behaviors was intrinsic motivation in the classic sense (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

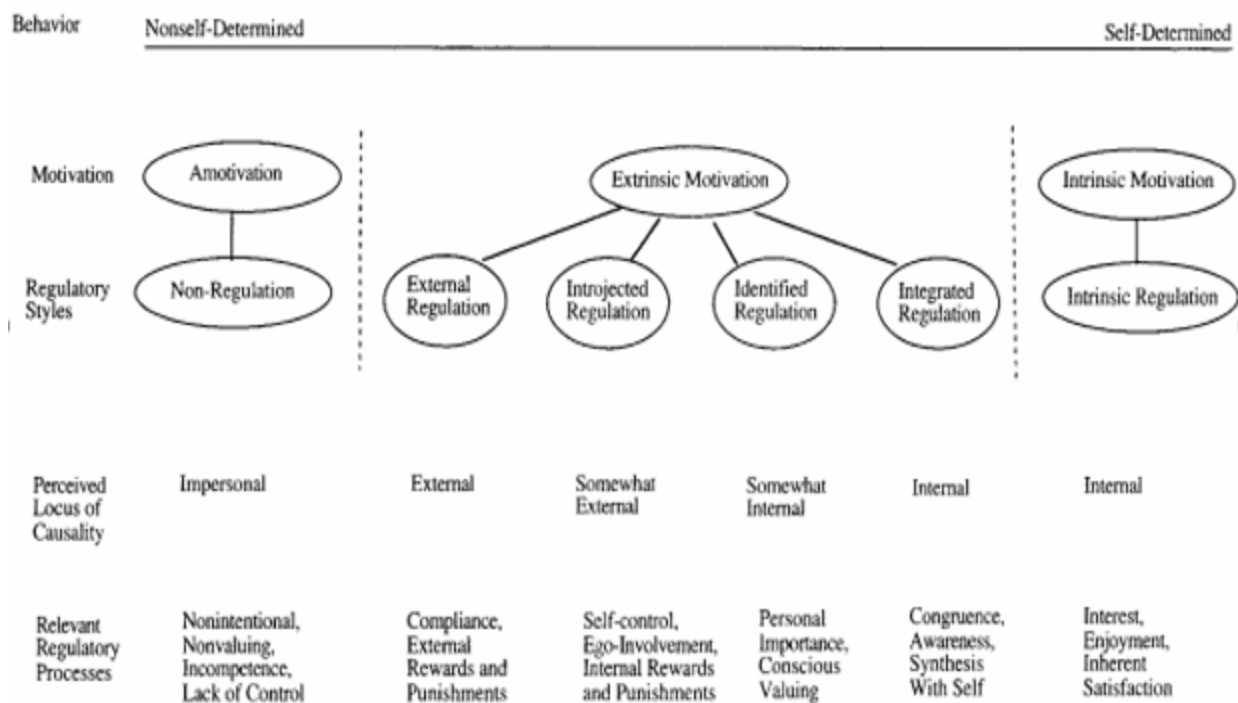


Figure 2. *The Self-Determination Continuum Showing Types of Motivation with Their Regulatory Styles, Loci of Causality, and Corresponding Processes (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p.72).*

Deci et al. (1994) tested the theory of introjection versus self-determination with a factorial experiment. The researchers tested the impact of three variable on the participants when given an assigned task. The variables were whether or not the participants received a rationale for the activity, whether or not personal feelings about the activity were recognized, and the degree to which the researcher used controlling language when assigning the task. Before conducting the experiment, Deci et al. (1994) hypothesized assigning a task in an environment that included some combination of rationale, acknowledgement of feelings, and language that was perceived to give choice, would result in behavior that was self-determined. Through the results of the experiment, the researchers determined the participants were more self-determined when at least two of the facilitating variables were present.

SDT could be reconciled with the notion that the internalization of external motivators resulted in a higher likelihood that behaviors were observed (Unlu, & Dettweiler, 2015). Unlu and Dettweiler (2015) conducted a study in which they used a constrained regression analysis to estimate the internalization of internal and external motivations. The analysis was conducted using a German version of the Academic Self-Regulation Questionnaire given to 84 German students. The purpose of the study was to quantify the level that motivation was internalized. They found that the level of internalization could be reasonably estimated, which supported claims made by Ryan and Deci (2000).

Framework for Student Led IEPs

A key framework in recent education pedagogy was the constructivist-learning model (Chiatula, 2015). This framework takes into account that every learner has had unique experiences that contributed to their worldview, therefore making them responsible for what they needed to learn and their decisions about what path to take to achieve educational goals. Miniotaite and Buciuniene (2013) suggested that effective leaders facilitated the self-awareness and motivation of those who were in their charge. Chiatula (2015) outlined six components of the framework as learners developed personal interpretation, new information was related to prior knowledge, educators were facilitators of learning, significant learning was achieved through application, interactive communication strengthens learning, and reflection by the student. The constructivist-learning model should be interpreted by educators to shift the focus from teaching to learning, giving the student the academic freedom to explore what was needed to achieve educational goals (Chiatila, 2015). Using the constructivist learning model, Chiatila's

research (2015) supported Ryan and Deci's (2000) notion of autonomy. Constructivist educators allowed students to communicate with other learners in meaningful ways by engaging them with tasks that required collaborative application (Coupal, 2004).

Dryden, et al. (2014) conducted a study using a quasi-experimental design to compare the knowledge of a control group with the knowledge of a group that received an intervention to teach safety and self-advocacy skills to high school students. The sample consisted of public high schools in Boston Massachusetts. The schools offered the treatment to all students with disabilities in each school. Dryden, et al. (2014) then compared the students who were selected for the treatment with those who were waitlisted. Data were collected using a survey given to both groups of students one week prior to implementation and one week after implementation. The findings of the study indicated that students who received the intervention were significantly impacted by the treatment.

Under the IDEA, students were required to be invited to attend their IEP meetings if a goal of the meeting was to discuss post-secondary options (Mitchell, et al., 2009). Mason, et al. (2004) outlined a framework for student-led IEP meetings that involved four steps. Although it was preferable for students to have received some type of training in self-advocacy, it was not necessary for students to participate in the student-led IEP process (Mason, et al., 2004). McGahee-Kovac et al. (2001) suggested that teachers should plan for four to six sessions to prepare students for leading their IEP. The topics that should be covered with students during these sessions include present levels of student performance, post-secondary transition, and the student's legal rights. Present levels of performance should include the student's strengths, weaknesses, needed

supports, achievement data, and how the disability impacted learning (Winterman & Rosas, 2014). The IEP should also include transition activities and related services related to the student's post-secondary goals (Schuck, 2014). The procedures outlined by Mason, et al. (2004) were able to be adapted for students of different ages and disabilities.

The first step of the preparation process was to inform students of their legal rights (Mason, et al., 2004). The basis of this information should be the laws that affected special education including IDEA, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This information could be taught individually or with a small group of students. Mason, et al. (2004) stated that the best practice was to review this information before discussing concerns related to individual classes and to create invitations to the IEP meeting for team members.

During the second step teacher should discuss with their students' assessment data, including standardized assessments, planning inventories, and transition questionnaires (Mason, et al., 2004). Lovitt and Cushing (1994) stated that students should have a clear understanding of their IEP goals and how these goals were evaluated. For students who possessed a current IEP, teachers should read specific parts of the document related to present levels of performance and post-secondary transition and/or transition in general. Teachers might want to also reference previously reported IEP progress (Mason, et al., 2004).

The third step of the process was for students to request input from other stakeholders for the IEP (Mason, et al., 2004). This could include parents, teachers, and other service providers. Students would request input concerning IEP goals and objectives, recommendations for new goals, and other areas of concern (McGahee et al.,

2001). The teacher should also discuss goals and concerns from the student's perspective during this step. The student would also compile a list of strengths and work areas to bring to the meeting during this step. Finally, the student and teacher would discuss the possible need of accommodations necessary to access the curriculum provided by the school (Mason, et al., 2004).

During the fourth step of the process, the student would develop a presentation or format to facilitate the meeting. Mason, et al. (2004) suggested that the teacher might want to use the school district's IEP format to guide the student in developing the presentation. After the students developed a protocol for facilitating the meeting, the student should practice presenting the information which the student gathered regarding the IEP. McGahee et al. (2001) wrote that while most students had some participation in IEP meetings, they have had reservations about leading the meeting for the first time. Teachers may want to have students who have led their meetings previously model how to facilitate a meeting (Mason, et al., 2004).

Cavendish and Connor (2018) conducted a study analyzing student, parent and teacher perceptions of IEP development. During the study, researchers used surveys and interviews to determine the perspectives of high school students with disabilities, their parents, and their teachers in relation to factors that influenced family involvement in the IEP process. Through the quantitative portion of the study, Cavendish and Connor (2018) found teachers and students agreed procedural safeguards were helpful if IDEA were implemented appropriately, but they disagreed on whether or not the IEPs were executed properly in practice. Four themes emerged from the qualitative portion of the study. The first theme was how the student participated in the IEP. Students reported a lack of

meaningful involvement in their respective IEP meetings and specifically noted minimal discussion of individual goals and post-secondary plans. The second theme was challenges to parent involvement in the IEP process. Participants reported transportation and scheduling as barriers to participation as well as parents not understanding the meetings when they did attend. The third theme concerned challenges and effective supports for graduation. All participants discussed the difficulty with standardized testing requirements and a lack of alternate routes to graduation. The final theme involved college and career preparation. Participants reported very limited opportunities in college and career preparation activities and coursework. Fish (2008), Park (2008), and Cavendish and Connor (2018) reported that parent and student involvement was, and continued to be, an area needing improvement as educators worked to realize the intent of IDEA.

Factors that Affect High School Graduation

High school graduates are prepared to enter post-secondary life with the skills necessary to be productive citizens in their respective communities (Zaff, et al., 2017). A high school diploma represents the skills needed to succeed in collegiate studies and live in financial independence (Belfield and Levin, 2007). Students who do not earn a high school diploma are more likely to be unemployed and less likely to earn a livable wage (Morrow and Villodas, 2018). There are several factors that affect high school graduation such as parental involvement, peers influence, teachers, and options offered in schools (Zaff, et al., 2017).

Families have a direct influence over child growth and development (Bornstein, 2002). Parents have the ability to provide education and access to multiple environments

from an early age (Grusec & Davidov, 2007). Parental involvement can manifest in different ways such as volunteering at school or helping their child with assignments (Jeynes, 2012). Children who receive emotional support from their parents are more likely to develop self-confidence and persevere through challenges associated with school (Rueger et al., 2010). Students have a better chance of graduating on time when their parents remain engaged in their education through their education (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

Peer groups of school-aged children affect behaviors that lead to academic success (Veenstra et al, 2013). When student peer groups have norms of high achievement, they tend to strive to attend school and increase their own achievement (Rambaran et al., 2017). Peer acceptance in general is also a factor that leads to higher academic achievement (Lease et al., 2002) which is strengthened when the accepting peers are also high achievers (Rambaran et al., 2017). Students who are surrounded by peers who strive to achieve in school have a better chance of graduating because they typically conform to the social and educational values of their peer group (Veenstra et al, 2013).

Students' relationships with teachers are also a contributing factor to high school graduation (Zaff, et al., 2017). Healthy student teacher relationships lead to increased academic achievement as well as higher engagement in school (Wang and Fredericks 2014; Wentzel et al., 2004). Relationships between students and teachers in which the student could talk with the teacher about personal issues and academic struggles improved outcomes for all students, but especially students who were at greater risk for not graduating (Croninger and Lee, 2001). Students' perception of their relationships with their teachers impact them throughout their school careers (Kim, 2021).

Extra-curricular opportunities offered to students during and after the school day provide a way for students to engage with the school outside of the traditional classroom (McNeal, 1995). They can also be used as a tool for teachers and administrators to encourage and maintain school enrollment by connecting students with peer groups that are likely to have a positive influence on academic achievement and attendance (Mahoney, 2000). Healthy relationships developed through participation in extra-curricular activities improve the social competence in students which facilitates their success at school (Mahoney et al., 2003). Participating in multiple school activities creates more opportunities for success at school which work to balance the challenges faced by students (Mahoney and Cairns, 1997).

Chapter Summary

Since 1975 students have benefited from the implementation of federal law that provided safeguards for students with special needs (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). IEPs dictated in a meaningful way the education that students with disabilities received while in public schools in the United States. Self determination theory as presented by Ryan and Deci (2000) supported the notion that students should be an integral part of the IEP planning process and have some autonomy in the decisions that impacted the education they received. Mason, et al. (2004) provided one example of how to implement a process that involved students in the IEP process. Results from research on their process indicated that students were more involved, they knew about their disability and educational rights, they were more confident, and their parent's involvement increased as well (Mason, et al., 2004).

Chapter III
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Although there have been considerable efforts made to improve the public-school experience for IDEA students, they are still graduating at a rate far lower than their peers in the United States. In the following chapter, the researcher described the research methods that were used to investigate the problem of IDEA graduation rate at one high school in Northeast Georgia. Maxwell (2013) stated that the methods chosen to conduct a research study must provide the researcher with the data needed to answer her or his research questions. The choice to use qualitative methods derived from process theory (Maxwell, 2013). Qualitative research was concerned with the processes that connected the participants in a study and how some circumstances might influence others. Maxwell also discussed the importance of identifying the researcher's personal, intellectual, and practical goals in order to be sure that the researcher could leverage them as an important source of insight and practical guidance while facilitating the research design.

The purpose of this study was to examine a public high school in Northeast Georgia with a lower graduation rate for special education students compared to non-disabled classmates in order to determine the factors impacting special education student graduation rates. Patton (2015, p. 6) wrote, "The first contribution of qualitative inquiry...is illuminating meanings and how humans engage in meaning making...." Because the researcher was concerned with understanding the IDEA student experience during schooling and what meaning teachers ascribed to that experience, a qualitative

approach was used to address the following research questions:

1. What are the life and educational experiences of identified special education teachers serving a public high school in Northeast Georgia with a lower graduation rate for special education students compared to non-disabled classmates?
2. What strategies and practices do identified special education teachers perceive are impacting special education student graduation rates at a public high school in Northeast Georgia with a lower graduation rate for special education students compared to non-disabled classmates?
3. What policies do identified special education teachers perceive are impacting special education student graduation rates at a public high school in Northeast Georgia with a lower graduation rate for special education students compared to non-disabled classmates?

Researcher Design and Rationale

The researcher investigated the perceptions of staff in a high performing high school in Northeast Georgia. The three research questions stated above guided a qualitative case study (Maxwell, 2013). The answers to these research questions provided detailed information about the participants' lived experiences with relation to their education and helped the researcher to understand the relationship as perceived by practitioners between their practice and the graduation rate of students with a learning disability in a Northeast Georgia high school. The central theory to this study was self determination theory (SDT), which was described as the relationship between autonomy, competence, relatedness, and behavior. Extrinsic motivators had the potential to affect

intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Hamdi, 2018). The researcher examined the perceived relationship of the strategies and practices of special education teachers and SDT through the lens of high school graduation.

A case is a phenomenon occurring in a bounded context (Miles, et al., 2020; Patton, 2015). The case itself may be defined as many different types of phenomena (Miles, et al., 2020), however for this study, the case was defined as the graduation of students with disabilities. The focus of this study was to investigate a case at a level of depth which allowed the researcher to fully understand the graduation rate of students with disabilities. Merriam (2002) asserted that research using the case study should begin with the purposeful selection of a case, because it was of interest to the researcher. The researcher was seeking to gain an experiential understanding (Stake, 1995) of the lives and educational experiences of the participants, therefore the case study design fit the purpose and research questions of this study because the researcher sought to illuminate an in-depth understanding of the experiences of a specific set of IDEA teachers.

For this study the researcher used an instrumental case study to understand the factors that were perceived by teachers to influence high school graduation at a high performing high school in Northeast Georgia with a discrepant IDEA graduation rate. An instrumental case study was ideal for this type of research because the case was studied in order to understand something else (Stake, 1995). In this study the researcher investigated the experiences of teachers in order to understand the factors affecting graduation. The case was bounded by teachers of students with learning disabilities who taught the students at a specific high school in Northeast Georgia during a defined period of time.

Constructivism was the epistemology that undergirds qualitative research. Constructivist researchers believe that people make personal and individual meaning of their surroundings (Creswell, 2014). The goal of constructivist research is to rely on participants to tell their stories in their own words to the greatest extent possible. Constructivist researchers also focused on the specific contexts in which people live and rely on their own backgrounds and experiences to interpret the data they collect (Creswell, 2014). The primary source of data collection was interviews, so the researcher could gather teacher perceptions of their experiences in their own words. In order to answer the research questions of this study, the researcher relied on the participant's personal description and interpretation derived from interviews to illuminate the understanding of this case.

Setting

The location of the study was a top performing high school in Northeast Georgia. The researcher purposefully selected a site that was most likely to yield rich data in order to answer the research questions and meet the research goals (Maxwell, 2013). Maxwell (2013) and Stake (1995) listed access as a concern for a qualitative researcher. The site was selected from the local Regional Education Service Agency. Top-performing in this study meant a high school in a district that had scores at or above 90 on the overall high school category of the CCRPI. The site demographics are listed in Table 2 (below). The selected site was comprised of grades 9-12 and over 80% of the student population was white. The student population was approximately 17% economically disadvantaged with roughly 10% of the students identified as being eligible for special education services. Although convenience was a factor in site selection, the researcher was primarily seeking

to rigorously understand a single case of discrepant graduation rate in a district that was identified by the Georgia Department of Education as high performing.

Table 2

Site Demographics

| | |
|---|------|
| Approximate Student Enrollment | 1200 |
| Approximate Staff | 110 |
| Approximate Special Education Enrollment | 120 |
| Approximate White Student Enrollment | 960 |
| Approximate Economically Disadvantaged Student Enrollment | 204 |

Role of the Researcher

In all qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for collecting and analyzing data (Merriam, 2002). The researcher was not a part of the faculty at the school that was studied, therefore his role was as an observer. The researcher was employed by the organization that the school operated within, but not at the school itself. For this reason, the researcher classified his role as a group member as peripheral. Adler and Adler (1987) stated that researchers might be unable to obtain group membership due to certain characteristics. The researcher did not have any supervisory relationships with any of the participants, did not work within the school, or work with special education for the organization, which would have made it difficult to gain active membership with the group.

Due to the fact that the researcher was the main instrument for data collection and analysis, he had to account for biases that might have impacted the results of the study (Merriam, 2002). The researcher was a veteran educator who taught special education in

Georgia public high schools, therefore he brought his own opinions and perspectives with regard to the factors that influenced high school graduation for students with learning disabilities. Researchers have a responsibility to describe accurately the participants' meaning of what was being studied and not their own (Ary et al., 2014). In order to ensure the reliability of the data collection and analysis the researcher conducted member checks (Seidman, 2013; Ary et al., 2014). The researcher recorded and transcribed interviews with participants. He also wrote memos that captured insights directly after interviews took place and used those tools to confirm the researcher's interpretation of the meaning that participants assigned to their experiences (Maxwell, 2013).

The final ethical concern that must be addressed explicitly was that the researcher conducted this study within his work environment. The site in which the data were collected was a school that was within the same district which employed the researcher. The researcher however worked at a different site within the school district and did not hold any direct line authority or supervisory responsibilities over anyone at the site which was studied. Furthermore, the researcher did not support the site with any matters related specifically to students with disabilities or the school staff that supports students with disabilities. For these reasons, the researcher did not foresee any validity issues related to conflicts of interest or power differentials within the study.

Methodology

Participant Selection

A select group of teachers was purposefully recruited to participate in this study. These individuals were selected based upon criteria believed by the researcher to provide rich data to answer the research questions (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Maxwell, 2013).

Six teachers participated in this study. The following criteria were used to select participants: they must have taught students served in special education under the category of SLD who attained the age of 17 prior to August 1, 2019; must have completed at least two years of teaching at the school site; and must have completed at least 5 years of teaching in their career. There were four male and two female teachers with eight to twenty years of experience in public education selected for the study. They were all white and had a minimum of four years of experience at the research site. The participants selected for this case were studied in a particular context in which the results were not intended to be generalized, which was why purposeful selection (Maxwell, 2013) was used than purposeful random sampling (Patton, 2015).

Data Collection

Data collection included multiple data sources including interviews, documents, field notes, and memos. Interviews focused on teacher experiences and were used as the main sources of data. The researcher used Seidman's (2013) in-depth three interview approach, and adapted it for the purposes of this study. The purpose of the interviews was to have the participants reconstruct their experiences in their own words, therefore the researcher asked direct open-ended questions. The questions used in the interview were follow-up questions based on what the participants shared as they reconstructed their experiences (Seidman, 2013). Interviews with teachers occurred in 90-minute increments with one to two weeks in between each interview. Interview one focused on the participant's life history. Seidman (2013) states that the first interview should be focused on the participants' experience up to the present moment in time in the context of the researcher's topic. Interview two focused on the participants' educational and

professional experience. Finally, the third interview focused on reflection and meaning of the participants' experience.

Case study methods are often concerned with observation (Stake, 1995). In this study, the researcher observed teachers with their students within the site and made field notes of what was observed in order to gain a deeper understanding of participant perspectives. According to Patton (2015) field notes are essential to qualitative analysis and should contain everything the researcher believes is worth noting. The researcher prepared a field note summary form adapted from Miles and Huberman (1984), listing the questions the researcher hoped to get responses to during each observation. The observation data were recorded on the field note summary forms, which included the following areas of observation: main issues that the researcher observed, information related to the target questions on the form, and any new questions the researcher had in considering the next visit to the site. The researcher observed classrooms during instructional time and interactions between teachers and students with disabilities at the site and made field notes during each observation. Each field note was dated and marked with the time and location of the observation. The field notes were richly descriptive, which allowed the researcher to re-experience what was observed during analysis (Patton, 2015).

Document review is also essential to case study research (Stake, 1995). Document review can provide important details about the context of the site (Miles & Huberman, 1984). In this study the researcher reviewed three types of documents. The student IEPs provided valuable insights into the participants' experience while teaching. The researcher also reviewed school schedules which helped to describe the day to day

operations of the students and teachers within the school. The third and final document reviewed was the school improvement plan. This document shed light on the overall context of what the school deemed to be important and how it focused its resources to accomplish its goals. Data from documents were recorded using a document summary form adapted from Miles and Huberman (1984). The document summary form included the name and description of the document, the significance of the document, and a summary of the contents of each document.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data collected during the study, the researcher must organize it in a way that makes it accessible, being careful not to replace the participants' consciousness with the researcher's (Seidman, 2013). In order to organize the interviews, the researcher recorded each interview and then transcribed each one, taking care to label and file each piece of datum so that interview data could be connected to the original source at any point during the study. Organizing the data in a way that facilitated access assisted the researcher in studying, reducing, and analyzing the data (Seidman, 2013). Data analysis occurred throughout the collection process (Miles, et al., 2020). The researcher entered interview transcripts, field notes, and documents into MAXQDA Professional Software for Qualitative and Mixed Methods Research. The researcher began with the files uploaded and organized by collection date and then by themes and categories after the coding cycles began.

During the first coding cycle, the researcher read the text of a transcribed interview and used the MAXQDA software to identify the interesting passages. The marked passages were based on the researcher's opinion of what was important

(Maxwell, 2013). According to Seidman (2013), it is important that researchers acknowledge that they are exercising their personal judgement in this part of the analysis process and have already begun the process of making meaning of the text. After identifying the passages, the researcher shared the identified passages with the corresponding participants via written correspondence in order to confirm if they also believed the identified passages seemed important to their story. Marking what was of interest to the researcher was an important step towards getting material into a form that could be shared (Miles & Huberman, 1984). In order to organize and share interview data, the researcher created participant profiles and sorted individual passages into categories by thematic connections (Seidman, 2013).

According to Seidman (2013), writing participant profiles will require adherence to a sequential process. Using MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software, the researcher first marked passages of interest and organized the totality of participant interviews into one profile using the words of the participant. This allowed the researcher to present what was learned about each participant as well as any connections that existed between participant experiences (Seidman, 2013). During the first coding cycle the passages of interest were used to create profiles of each participant that served to “present the participant in context, to clarify his or her intentions, and to convey a sense of process and time” (Seidman, 2013, p. 122).

In the second coding cycle, the researcher assigned codes to words, phrases, statements, and paragraphs from the interview transcripts using the in vivo and process coding approaches described by Miles, et al. (2020). In vivo coding involved the use of the participants’ own words in the transcripts as codes. Process coding used gerunds to

note the action taking place in the data. By using these two coding approaches with the interview data, the researcher intentionally honored the participants' voices and identified the participants' perception of action in the data. During this cycle the researcher used descriptive coding (Miles, et al., 2020) to code documents and field notes collected and created during field work. Again, using qualitative data analysis software, the researcher organized and stored data. The second coding cycle was used to summarize and organize segments of data from all sources.

During the third coding cycle the researcher used pattern coding to organize data from the second coding cycle into more meaningful patterns of data (Miles, et al., 2020). According to Miles, et al. (2020), pattern codes were usually made up of the following four summarizers: categories or themes, causes or explanations, human relationships, and concepts or theoretical constructs. These four initial summarizers were used as a guide to identify emerging patterns in the material coded during the second cycle of coding. During this cycle, the researcher used the MAXQDA program to display the data for analytic purposes.

The researcher used the results of this study to discuss the perceived factors that influenced high school graduation for learning disabled students, which will be presented in Chapter 6. After careful analysis of transcripts, documents, and field notes, the researcher found themes that were present across all transcripts and presented those themes along with examples in the participant's own words. The analysis preserved the participants' words in order to share how they described their own experiences.

Validity

In order to ensure credibility of the study, the researcher collected rich data, used triangulation, and validated data interpretation with participants. Data collection occurred over several months and consisted of interviews from a variety of participants. Maxwell (2013) defined triangulation as collecting data from a range of participants across multiple settings, using a variety of methods. The researcher compared the interview data, documents, and field notes in search of agreement or the lack thereof in order to reduce the risk of associations caused by researcher bias. Triangulating different methods and sources corroborated the data collected which enhanced the validity and trustworthiness of the study (Stake, 1995; Miles, et al., 2020).

Miles, et al. (2014) defined dependability as how quality and stability were ensured by the researcher. Dependability could also be described as whether or not the results of the study were logical, given the corresponding data set (Merriam, 2002). In order to ensure dependability, the researcher created and maintained an audit trail. The audit trail was a journal in which the researcher recorded problems that were encountered while collecting data, decisions that were made during data collection and analysis, and reflections of the researcher as he completed the analysis (Merriam, 2002). These journal entries were recorded electronically and easily accessible in case any clarification was needed.

Maxwell (2013) pointed out the distinction between external generalizability and internal generalizability. The former referred to the ability to generalize the results beyond the case studied, while the latter referred to the ability to generalize the results of the study to the case as a whole. The generalizing process for this study began with the

selection of the case that was similar to other settings. School leaders serving at schools with similar demographics may consider the findings of this study to be applicable to their schools. If a consumer of research processes what is learned from a deep analysis of a particular situation and reflects on how the knowledge gained from that analysis can be applied to other instances, then generalization can occur (Merriam, 2002). The researcher provided a rich and detailed description of participant perspectives that presents the knowledge gained from this study in a way that may be applied to a similar case (Maxwell, 2013; Creswell, 2014).

The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection in qualitative research and therefore brings biases to the study (Merriam, 2002). These biases are a threat to the validity of the study (Maxwell, 2013), however in order to respond to these biases, the researcher identified and recorded how they might be shaping the data collection and analysis. For example, the researcher had formal training in special education and had previously worked as a special education teacher and administrator. The researcher's experience with IDEA students during their academic career revealed that their ability to navigate school successfully while coping with their disability varied. This inspired the researcher to study the perceived factors that influenced graduation for IDEA students. In order to respond to any biases that might have existed, the researcher used memos created throughout the study to identify any assumptions that could have shaped data collection and analysis throughout the study (Merriam, 2002).

Ethical Procedures

The research study met the definitions and requirements of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Valdosta State University and the institution in which the

research was conducted. In order to gain access to the site, a written formal request was submitted to the school district describing the goals and objectives of the research and asking to interview select teachers within the school. After the school system and the principal of the school authorized the research, the researcher scheduled interviews with participants. In order to reach the participants, the researcher contacted the Director of Special Education for the site. The researcher explained the purpose of the study and provided the criteria for participant participation in the study. The researcher also explained the purpose and relevant information regarding the study to the principal and ask the principal to provide a list of teachers who were eligible for the study. Throughout all communications regarding consent, the researcher emphasized that participant participation was voluntary, that identities would be kept confidential, and that the researcher would follow IRB guidelines of Valdosta State University regarding informed consent.

Chapter Summary

Students with disabilities are graduating at a rate significantly lower than their peers (Digest of Education Statistics, 2019). The researcher used an instrumental case study design to answer the three research questions previously stated that guided the study. Participants were purposefully selected using specified criteria to answer the research questions. The researcher implemented Seidman's (2013) interview protocol in order to ensure a deep and rich description of participant experiences. Data analysis included creating participant profiles and coding of words and phrases to assess consistency among data and identification of themes. Issues of trustworthiness were addressed by using strategies including triangulation, member checks, researcher

memoing, rich description, and audit trails. Designing a case study that included a structured data collection process and research-validated analysis techniques ensured that consumers of this study will find the study to be credible.

Chapter IV PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Public schools in America have been implementing IDEA for over 40 years and after the expenditure of great effort, time, and financial resources, students with disabilities still are graduating at a rate significantly lower than their classmates (U.S. Department of Education, 2010; Digest of Education Statistics, 2019). The purpose of this study was to examine the life and educational experiences of IDEA students attending a public high school in Northeast Georgia with a significantly lower graduation rate for IDEA students as compared to non-disabled classmates in order to determine the barriers impacting IDEA graduation rates. The findings in this study may inform educators along with policy makers on how to more effectively support students in order to overcome the barriers that are believed to hinder IDEA students from graduating. Using qualitative methods, the researcher investigated teacher perceptions of students with learning disabilities and staff in a high performing high school in Northeast Georgia.

Summary of Participant Narrative Profiles

Six special education teachers were purposefully selected to be interviewed for this study. The participant group consisted of four white males and two white females. Their experience ranged from eight to twenty years in public education with a minimum of four years of experience at the research site. The researcher interviewed each participant three times between October and December of 2019 to collect data. During their interviews, the participants discussed their life experiences and perceptions leading up to and during their time as educators at a public high school in Northeast Georgia with a significantly lower graduation rate for IDEA students compared to non-disabled

classmates. The remainder of this chapter is a series of participant profiles that help to better understand the collective experiences of each participant. Seidman (2013) suggested that creating participant profiles would be useful in data interpretation by presenting each participant in the context of process, time, and intentions. In order to create these profiles, the researcher reviewed and annotated transcripts, reread observation notes, and wrote a coherent story using what was shared by each participant during the interview process. These profiles demonstrate the knowledge gained from reflecting on the experiences of others. Participants names were changed to maintain their anonymity.

Corey

Corey is a female White teacher with 15 years of teaching experience. She is currently teaching at a predominantly White school with the following student demographics: 81.4% white, 6.4% Hispanic, and 6.1% black. The school has a 97.97% four-year graduation rate for all students and a 76.47% four-year graduation rate for special education students. The interviews were conducted in Corey's resource classroom. This room was modestly furnished with a high-top table in the center of the classroom with four chairs around it and 10 desks in the rear of the room. I sat in the one of the student desks to conduct the interviews, while Corey sat behind her desk. Her classroom walls were decorated with student schedules, pictures of students participating in athletic events and motivational quotes. One such quote read, "What you learn in school will shape the rest of your life." Corey seemed timid yet comfortable during the first interview and continued to become more comfortable as we discussed her experiences.

Corey “grew up at the Beach Resort. Probably the best life ever. Went to public elementary school, public high school, may have skipped a few classes to go to the beach a few times, just kidding.” At the time she was living her best life “a mile from the beach . . . inside of an amusement park . . . the perfect childhood.” She spent time with a lot of family around her who assisted with managing the amusement park. Corey discussed how she took for granted at the time how she lived in an amusement park, but looking back, she understood how atypical that was for children.

Corey was raised by hard working parents. Her father “worked his whole life with his hands, went to a technical school, he was a mason full-time” and lived his whole life in the same county. On the other hand, her mother was a more venturesome veteran nurse, who did “everything from pediatrics to home health to case managing” for over 35 years. Corey lived in Alaska for 2 years and then moved to Hawaii for 2 years. From there, she moved to Florida before finally settling down in Georgia. Corey described her father as a blue-collar worker who had to work really hard in order to make a living, while her mother was a nurse who always had intentions of attending post-secondary school. Corey’s family highly valued education and believed it would be a way of making her life easier. Thus, while growing up making anything but A’s and B’s in school was not an option. She was rewarded for “A’s and B’s” and failure was punishable by being “grounded for a good month.” Corey captured her parents’ value on education in the following anecdote:

My sister kind of set the standard high but of course, she was that like I'm the goody-goody and that's how I do, I don't play sports and . . . I mean, nothing's wrong with that but she kind of, compared to my brother and I, we were both into

sports. They always told us that, undergrad was paid for, anything after that was on us but there was no expectation of you can go to high school, graduate, and go to work, like we had to go to college, that was what we did.

Corey also described this expectation of going to college as being a pervasive part of the culture around education in the community when she was growing up.

Corey was raised in a close-knit community with shared values and where everyone knew everyone. She attributed some of her academic success to her community that kept her in check. She stated:

Sometimes you have to watch what you're doing. There was a lot of "Oh, I'm going to go tell your grandfather and that," which my grandfather-- he was so laid back, he didn't really care but, "I will find your mom, I knew your mom. I grew up with your mom. I'm going to go tell her." There's a lot of that but I didn't really do anything either. I was too busy playing softball. Every night was spent on some field, I mean that's what I did. I didn't know any better, I don't know any different.

While in elementary school, Corey had a speech impediment that forced her to repeat kindergarten due to her lack of demonstrating her ability to speak. She credits her caring first grade teacher for helping her overcome this learning problem. This sense of community continued to propel her through high school.

Corey credits her first-grade teacher as the one who inspired her to become a teacher. She admired her teacher's trait caring for students. She described her winding trajectory that eventually led her to her teaching career:

I think my first grade had a lot of influence with my, kind of, career pathways. So, I kind of had an interest in there and then when I got into high school, I think it

was, like, junior-senior year, I was doing more work-based learning. I remember one internship was at a daycare. I mean I've always had the interest, I've always grown up babysitting just always wanted to be around kids. I used to have that nurturing side. So, kind of, towards the end of high school, I mean I was dead set on getting some kind of teaching degree. My undergrad was elementary ed but I've always had a special ed side too. I'm K-12 certified in special ed and my first job was high school special ed.

Corey was drawn to special education because of her compassion towards individuals with special needs and her experience working with a young special needs child whom she helped after school. She therefore chose to train as an elementary education and special education teacher at the age of 21. She got her first high school special education job in Massachusetts. As a young 21 year old teacher, Corey had her share of challenges ranging from being, “treated more like a para pro that year” to being denied choosing what to teach and “just given me whatever leftover they picked it from one.” After working in the high school setting for a few years, Corey went to work in the elementary school setting as a special education teacher, before returning to the high school setting where she is currently teaching. Corey acknowledged that there is tension at times between graduation requirements and what her students really need. Overall, Corey’s “ultimate goal is to see these kids succeed in the way that will most benefit them for a future that they can-- I know they can leave this building and be somewhat understanding and stable for the rest of their life.

Kate

Kate has been teaching for 8 years, all of which have been at the research site. She is a White female and she is married with children ranging from elementary age to high school age. Our interviews took place in Kate's classroom. The room seemed very well-organized with desks placed in rows and schedules posted on the walls. One schedule was of the students' birthdays while others were upcoming assignment due dates. On the wall behind Kate's desk there was a collage of pictures of her family and students next to a sign that read, "Believe there is good in the world" with "Be the good" highlighted. I sat in a student desk in order to conduct the interviews which was adjacent to Kate, who sat behind her desk. Kate seemed shy in the first interview and did not elaborate much without prompting but became more comfortable as we progressed through the three interviews.

Kate began by discussing her experience as a young student. She had a speech impediment and received speech services as a result.

I didn't like that . . . I had to leave during that time when everybody got to watch us leave. . . . So, I didn't like that, however, I always did what was asked. I always followed the rules, never got in trouble, honor student, involved in sports, a statistician for the basketball team.

Kate shared that another large part of her childhood were the foster siblings with whom she was raised. She lived with 34 foster sisters over a ten-year period, with up to 8 siblings at a time.

One girl stayed with us for six years . . . wasn't supposed to stay that long but she did. But we knew why they were with us. We knew that when we went to the

grocery store and when there was a 17-year-old calling my Mom, who was not old and to be her mother, Mom. She still helps manage their money and their budgets because they can't do them. They came from broken homes or drug homes or the same things you would expect these days.

Kate found that time to be very interesting as she reflected, but said that as she got older, her mother decided to focus on the children who were living with them permanently. Her mother was a stay-at-home mom until the children were old enough to attend school, and then she returned to the workforce as a teacher. Kate pointed out that she and her mother took similar paths to the classroom. "I got my degree and got married, stayed home and raised my kids. Then when my youngest started Pre-K is when I started working here." Kate spent her childhood on a farm and believed the values she was taught as a child by her parents strongly influenced who she was as an adult.

Kate spoke very highly of her parents, who met in college. Her father served in the Navy after briefly attending college. After completing his military service, he finished his degree and became a teacher.

So, my Dad went to school to be a Math and Science teacher which was his first degree. My Mom was an English Ed major. She ended teaching adult literacy and GED classes which she did after all of us were in school. My Dad taught Math and Science. Then he became a Principal and a Superintendent.

When speaking of her parents' point of view on education, Kate said, "I never felt that they had to spell out that this is what's you're going to do. I think just the way we're raised and the responsibilities that were given." Kate recalled that she nor her siblings were ever disciplined due to a lack of effort in the classroom. She described a very strict routine of

eating a snack and completing homework every day when she returned home from school. Her family was important to her and her experience with foster siblings really helped her to understand that individuals could have a wide range of differing abilities.

Kate remembered being excited about completing her teacher preparatory program and becoming a teacher.

I know I was getting closer to the goal I'd set for myself. I remember being slightly overwhelmed about other responsibilities that would then be on my shoulders and not just watching someone do it. And then making sure that I was always prepared. I don't like not being prepared for things. I would just find the time to make sure that I knew the material. I'd try to figure out what the kids might get wrong and try to. . . . I remember always working the problems out ahead of time and trying to work them from several different ways because I wanted to try to figure out, if they made a mistake, where they got it wrong.

When Kate was student teaching, her supervising teacher was in the last year of her career. Kate remembered her supervising teacher turning the class over to her very early in the semester. Her course load consisted of two Algebra II classes, and one credit recovery pre-algebra class. Kate described the difficult situation that some of the students in those classes were experiencing and how she had to look for creative ways to motivate them throughout the semester. "I started putting stickers on their papers when they did well. They started peeling them off and sticking them on the front of their binders and bragging about their collection. At that point they started taking some pride in their work." When Kate was asked what her goal was for students in that situation, she responded,

Well going back to my childhood and knowing that my parents always tried to create a safe home and a safe place for people to be in, I always felt loved. I mean, I tried to always come with a positive attitude and try to let them know that school's not going to be easy. That some parts of it is easier than others. Some people may understand things better than others, but we've got to always give our best. So, what I tried to do was just give them a positive attitude, try to make learning fun, I mean joke when you can to try to connect with them, but I just kind of go back to where I was from and just saw my parents demonstrated as the foster parents and try to mimic what they do.

Kate now perceives that her job is to help students to reach their full potential. “I am trying to get them to do as much as possible on their own to reach their potential, whether it is brushing their teeth or whether it is solving a math problem.” She believed that students in her classes all had unique challenges that could be overcome. She said it was her duty to help them reach the highest level of independence. Kate has taught in separate classrooms as well as in the general education setting. “We don't know what everyone's background is but everybody's got something that they're dealing with. Whether it was death in the family or whether someone's got cancer or there's no food at home.” Kate always tried to learn about her students what everyone else may not be able to see on the surface.

Elliot

Elliot is a married father of three children. He teaches special education and Social Studies at the research site and is in his 15th year of teaching. The interviews took place in his classroom. Elliot sat behind his desk during the interviews and was very

comfortable and willing to discuss everything in great detail from the onset of interviews. The desks in the classroom were set up in rows and there were dry erase boards on the wall in the room. Elliot also coached football at the research site and had several news clippings featuring the football team posted on the wall. Elliot began by discussing his childhood and remained enthusiastic and energetic throughout all three interviews.

Elliot lived in the suburbs of Philadelphia as a child and described his neighborhood as blue-collar. "I think the community we grew up in, I think we had a lot of people that probably didn't go to college in terms of the parents. It was a very close community and everyone seemed to like each other." Elliot remembered summers where everyone was outside when they were home. The parents in the neighborhood would sit out on their porches and watch the children play in the street. Elliot recalled everyone's parents in the neighborhood having similar views on education for their children.

Elliot believed the parents viewed education of their children as a way for them to have better lives in the future. "I think they were really serious about, you know, their kids doing better now." Because several of his peers' parents worked hourly jobs, the children did not always necessarily have the support at home to excel in school. Many parents in the community chose to pay for their children to attend parochial schools at a significant cost because they perceived them to offer a better education despite not being overly wealthy. Elliot said:

But you had a bunch of parents like know they're gonna go to the Catholic school and, you know, I'm gonna put like, I'm putting my heart and money into this. You would hear that a lot, like, you're not gonna mess up when I put my heart and money into this.

Parents in the neighborhood would often express to their children that they needed to do well in school so they would not have to work the jobs that they had. “I remember my buddy's dad was in the trucking business. And his dad's like, ‘Listen, yeah, I can pay for all these things. But I'm never home.’” Elliot’s parents wanted him to receive the best education so they made the decision to send him at the Catholic school when he became old enough to attend school.

Elliot’s parents believed that the Catholic school environment provided the structure that he needed to be successful, however he transferred to the local public school when he entered the first grade. He described his public school as an old building with three to four classes per grade. He had a very consistent routine at his elementary school and still remembered how predicable the days were. Elliot had two teachers in elementary school who he thought were extremely effective for different reasons. The first teacher provided many opportunities for hands on learning experiences. Elliot thought that this really fit his learning style because he “. . . felt kind of unlocked. Like, we had chickens. We were always doing projects. So that was good. And I think she was comfortable, like, you know how that looks.” The second teacher provided a structured and fast-paced environment and he thought he “. . . really got something from the structure of it. I never felt like we did something for too long.” Elliot enjoyed elementary school and found his teachers to be supportive throughout his experience.

Elliot and his family moved to Georgia before starting middle school. The school that he attended was much larger than the school he attended in elementary school,

So I get to Georgia, and I get there in the summer. So I guess, in a sense, I got to kind of get a feel for some kids in the neighborhood stuff like that. But the middle

school was big. I mean, you had, I think there were like four pods of four teachers for each grade level.

He remembered the size the school made it easy for him to get away with not working as hard, but also remembers being prepared for the curriculum. Elliot had a middle school teacher who he described as effective because she knew how to keep him engaged. He didn't remember much about her teaching strategies but she “. . . worked really hard to keep me accountable, and it drove me nuts then, but I think as I reflect on it now, that's probably why I liked her.” The teacher knew how to address inappropriate behavior in a way that didn't harm their relationship. He also recalled having teachers in middle school who provided active learning experiences which he thought matched his learning style. His teachers identified him in middle school as having some learning deficits that needed to be addressed. Elliot was put on medication for attention deficits toward the end of his time in middle school.

During high school, Elliot and his parents made the decision to discontinue his medication because he didn't like it and they did not see it as being beneficial to his improvement. They decided to take “. . . a different approach to--I think my parents took a different approach to my academics to a degree in high school.” He was assigned a case manager to oversee his academic performance and the case manager met frequently with him and his parents. The school worked with Elliot on organization and he became involved in school clubs and athletics. He also began working part time. His parents “. . . kind of looked at the big picture like, academically, he's not going to be on like, he's not going to be an AP kid. But he does all these other things and we feel good about the direction you're headed as a person.” They still expected him to make good grades and

keep up with his assignments, but were more focused on him being a well-rounded individual.

Elliot started college in Georgia. At some point during his freshman year, his parents went through a divorce. At that time, he decided to stop going to college and go to work. After working a few months out of state, Elliot decided to return to Georgia and finish his degree. Elliot had a teacher in college who told him that he was really intelligent and told him he would be grading him differently based on his potential.

I never had a teacher who talk to me like that. . . . To have somebody who kind of really get after me in a way that made me want to get into teaching. Then, I said I have thought about this in the past and that if I can do half as much as this guy has done for his students then we will be all right.

Elliot recalled his early years of teaching and how he thought that his students were going to really be engaged in his content area. He learned quickly that in order to reach his students he would have to connect with them as people. Elliot believes that the most important job of teachers is to help kids find their place and their passion. “There's something about when a young person finds their (sic) niche, it's fun to watch what happens to them (sic).”

John

John has been teaching for a total of 20 years and has taught for four years at the research site. He is a White male and is married with one child who receives special education services. The interviews were conducted in John's classroom. John was a coach at the school and taught Social Studies in the Special Education Department. His room was plain with the desks placed in rows and all facing the white board in the front of the

room. I sat in a student desk across from John, who also sat in a student desk while we conducted the interview. John was very reflective throughout the interviews and took his time to think before answering most of the questions. He seemed comfortable and thoughtful during all three interviews.

John lived in the same house and attended schools within the same school system from kindergarten through the 12th grade. He was raised in Florida and lived with his father. John described his neighborhood as being different than most neighborhoods today. There weren't many kids in the neighborhood and there was no sidewalk. He had a couple friends who lived on his street with whom he would play with as a child. Their favorite hobbies were drawing and playing video games. John's father worked six days a week until late in the evening. His grandmother would come over to the house to care for him and his two siblings most days. John's father worked as a boat mechanic and owned a marina. His stepmother was a hairdresser who owned a hair salon and his biological mother was a nurse. John remembers his father always telling him and his siblings that they would go to college after they graduated from high school.

One of John's first memories of school was a butterfly project his class did in kindergarten. "We were standing up doing the Pledge of Allegiance and the assistant teacher was in the back of the room and all of the sudden she just stopped and said, "Oh, my gosh! The butterflies coming out!" He attended elementary school at a K-5 school and remembers riding his bike to and from school every day. When John was in the fifth grade, he had his teacher come to his house to share a failing grade with his father. He said:

I had a teacher that (sic) lived a couple of blocks away, she was my fifth-grade teacher, and she brought my test to my door when I answered the door, and she showed my dad my failing test grade and that was pretty awful experience.

John made a lot of mistakes that year and had a difficult time staying on track. He had another teacher in elementary school who he really enjoyed. "I just remember that she made the day fun and I can't remember everything that we learned but I enjoyed having her as a teacher." John enjoyed elementary school and matriculated to middle school with the same peer group.

John had his first experience with male teachers in middle school and said that they had a positive impact on him. He had a better experience in middle school than he did in elementary school. He enjoyed having physical education every day and playing intermural sports. He credits his seventh-grade teacher with inspiring him to become a teacher. "He had such a big impact and that's what I taught, science, science and social studies in middle school." John remembered how successful he was in that teacher's class and in discovering what learning style worked best for him.

John described his transition to high school as difficult. He drifted apart from many of his friends from middle school and developed a new peer group. He remembers sports being a big part of stabilizing his new peer group and keeping him out of trouble. "Joining that volleyball team, I mean that was my social group and kind of steered me into the right direction and kind of gave me a peer group to kind of get through." John had a student teacher for 9th grade literature and thought he was unprepared for 10th grade, however he decided to take the honors course and was proud of his success in that class. He experienced a lot of success his sophomore year and recalls that year as being a

catalyst for the rest of his high school career.

I was on the morning announcements and all that stuff, but it made me feel important, and I think that also that, that sophomore year kind of-- volleyball worked out for me, a teacher recognized me. Everything kind of worked out and I just felt very confident that sophomore year and I think it kind of propelled me to do much better to finish through high school.

John's favorite teacher in high school was his Biology teacher. When asked what made that teacher special John said,

I mean I remember dissecting frogs, I remember all those tests, he just was a good guy, I mean, he looked like, I mean he had a mustache and the pocket protector, he looked like Bill Nye, it's just hilarious, but he was such a good teacher and he made it fun and I really thrived in that environment.

John said his high school experience was the culmination of everything his father had taught him and that was when he understood why his father was always adamant that he did well in school. He said his teachers in high school made him feel special and made him feel confident in himself.

After high school John decided to enroll in a local college and pursue an associate's degree. While enrolled, John worked at the YMCA with adult and youth programs. Through that experience he realized that he wanted to work in the field of education. After completing his associate's degree, John went on to earn a bachelor's degree in education. He really enjoyed his student teaching experience and admired his supervising teacher. He appreciated the way his supervising teacher treated every student as an individual and tried to understand how to help each of them. After completing his

student teaching, John began to teach science at a middle school in Georgia.

John had to spend a lot of time early on in his career preparing to teach his classes. He became much more familiar with the content he was teaching in his first couple of years of teaching and really focused on being organized for the students. John became interested in differentiated instruction through professional learning opportunities which were offered at his school. As a result of this interest, John was teamed with a co-teacher in the Special Education Department and eventually worked to become certified in special education. When asked to describe the perfect school, John said that it simply needs to have good teachers.

I think if teachers are motivated to do a good job and to serve their students, that it doesn't really, you know, the administrative part of it, is not as big as of an influence. I think that, if you have teachers that (sic) are not on par with the other teachers in the building then administration is that much more important.

He has seen the difference that teachers can have from his experience in schools. He believes that special education teacher should have good classroom management practices and a diverse set of teaching strategies that are applied at the appropriate time.

Ralph

Ralph is a White male teacher who serves as the Special Education Department Chair at the research site. He has taught for 8 years, 7 of which have been at his current school. The interviews were conducted in Ralph's office. He sat behind his desk while the interviewer sat across from him in a chair. The office had nothing on the walls and the only furniture was a desk and three chairs. Ralph was cordial and gregarious at times during the interviews. He was very comfortable and proud to discuss his experiences and

his work with the interviewer.

Ralph lived in a small town in Northeast Georgia. His parents kept the same house throughout his upbringing on a rural road with four other houses on it. Ralph's father worked as a butcher, salesman, and delivery driver. His mother drove a school bus. Both of Ralph's parents were high school graduates, but neither of them attended college. Ralph remembers having about six friends with whom he was close as young child. He enjoyed having sleepovers and their families spending time together.

Well, yeah, and it was almost like the dads rotated off who was going to coach, sometimes it was my dad, sometimes I had a good friend and his dad would His dad was a train conductor, so he had kind of a crazy schedule what is there were years where he would be the coach. So, we almost kind of saw our friends' dads like a second, third, like father figure because like I said, they were coaching us and like I said, we were over at their house so much that you gave respect to them just like you would your own parents.

Ralph spent a significant amount of time around sports and particularly enjoyed playing basketball. He would play basketball as a young student and continued through high school and college. Ralph believed that his parents had high expectations for him in academics as well as athletics throughout his childhood.

Ralph's first school experience was kindergarten and he reminisced on what it was like when he was dropped off on the first day of school.

The first day I went to kindergarten my dad took me to school. And my dad being as old school as he was he walks me to the door and he says, "There you go, buddy. Yeah, this is school, go have headache." It wasn't really emotional or

anything like that. I still remember that because I was like, you know it kind of was like I don't even remember having a mental preparation that I was going to school because like I said I had not been to preschool, my mom stayed home with me and everything like that, so just going in there and feeling honestly, for the first couple months kind of felt like I was behind the other kids.

Ralph said there was a lot of competition in school. He recalls that there was a lot of awards that the school gave out, such as top student in the different content areas. His parents expected him to win those awards so that was something he always strived to do. One of Ralph's proudest accomplishments from elementary school was winning an essay contest. The winner of the contest was expected to read the essay in front of the school. Ralph was intimidated to share his work in front of the student body but did it anyway.

You always get some butterflies when you speak in front of people but it was something like I remember how scared I was before I did that, and then after I was finished I can always reference, well, that really wasn't that bad. That's just something I carried on the rest of my life.

Ralph spoke highly of his elementary school teachers but his second-grade teacher was his favorite. She “. . . was caring at times, would push you hard at times, the thing I remembered is that she was always fair.” He clarified that she wasn't always nice, but she was fair. He appreciated her ability to be hard on her students without being unlikeable.

Ralph transitioned to middle school where there were student coming together from five different elementary schools. He remembers the teachers being good teachers and students having a hard time getting along. “There was a lot of verbal and physical altercations at the school. Like I said, it just wasn't a great mix per se.” Ralph's middle

school was separated into teams. Most of the day the same kids would all be in classes together except for when some would combine for accelerated and advanced classes.

Ralph's favorite middle school teacher taught Social Studies. Ralph recalled how some of his peers had behavior problems in other classes, but when they came to this social studies class, they were well-behaved and engaged. He credited his teacher's organization and classroom management for the environment in that classroom. "Beyond the content like some of the situations he puts you in that you were able to refer back to later in life," such as presenting content to his peers at the front of the class. When asked to contrast another teacher who he did not connect with as well, Ralph described a science class. "I never had a clear understanding of what her expectations were and how it was going to be graded." He enjoyed the structure and predictability of the Social Studies class and did not get that in the science class.

Ralph enrolled in the city school system when he entered high school rather than continuing in the county school system. The first thing that came to mind about his high school was the culture. He said they were all "together, and they will swear to you until they're blue in the face that they're better than you." He said that the pride that people had in that school was palpable. Teachers would spend their careers in the same place and never leave. He enjoyed the consistency of knowing what to expect and who his teachers would be as he matriculated through school. Ralph "felt like you got what you earned" at his school and he appreciated that aspect of the faculty. His favorite teachers were teachers who allowed him to make fun of himself and showed him how the lesson worked in real life. "Right now, if the principal told me I could walk back across the stage and start over as a ninth-grader, I do it. That's how much I enjoyed my time over

there.”

After high school Ralph went to college and continued to play basketball for the school. He remembers struggling to adjust to the workload during the first semester, but being a much better student during the second semester. Ralph began his college career as a business major but switched to education when he lost interest in business. “I sort of always pictured myself as a history teacher/basketball coach.” Ralph wanted to pursue a degree in education because “it just made sense that I had spent my whole life playing basketball, that I would stay around the game in some capacity.” After completing his education degree, he worked as a teaching assistant at the university teaching physical education courses. Ralph enjoyed that first teaching experience and really thought it helped him prepare to be organized and learn about classroom management.

Ralph’s first teaching job in the public-school setting was at an elementary school. He did not think that age group was his “cup of tea,” but did find the experience to be useful to him. “The most beneficial thing from it was learning how to do all of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) paperwork because putting an IEP meeting together at the elementary school level is so much more complicated than at the high school level.” Preparing and implementing IEPs was one of the things he had to learn early on and he said these plans were more complicated at the elementary school level. Ralph was only there for one year, when he decided to take a job teaching high school at the research site and he has served there ever since.

Kurt

Kurt is a male White teacher in the special education department at the research site. He has nine years of experience and has taught for 4 years at the research site. Kurt

is married with 2 children. The interviews were conducted in a common room utilized for credit recovery classes. There was a teacher desk, several tables, and four study carrels in the room. The walls were white and empty, with the exception of some career technical agricultural education posters placed around the room. Kurt was very jovial throughout the interviews and seemed very comfortable speaking about his experiences. He laughed often and enjoyed telling stories about his family and his students.

Kurt was raised in a small farming town in the Northeast corner of Georgia and described it as a good place to grow up. He didn't live in a traditional neighborhood as a child. His family was not "surrounded by too many others, but it was a good place, not a lot of trouble." The other kids his age who lived near him would roam up and down the street together and hang out at a convenient store mostly. Many of the parents either worked industrial jobs, farmed, or worked for the school system. Kurt spent a lot of time with his grandparents who were farmers. His father worked in heating and air and his mother worked as a school teacher after earning her college degree later in life. She put college on hold when Kurt was young so she could "keep being able to stay home with us and mainly support the family." Kurt's parents were very involved with his education throughout his schooling. The school system had a high dropout rate and his parents knew that there would be more opportunities afforded to him if he continued his education after high school.

Kurt's elementary school served students in grades kindergarten through grade five. He had a speech impediment when he was in elementary school which required him to receive special services. Kurt liked his speech teacher but said she was "nuts." He spoke of feeling singled out at times due to receiving speech instruction. At recess, "The

speech teacher would stand on the top of the hill and holler down for me, "Oh! It's time to go to speech." Just in case everybody didn't know, I had speech." The teachers at Kurt's elementary school were "country people but they knew it what they were doing and early on took steps to help me." He also received occupation therapy while in elementary school in order to improve his handwriting. Kurt had to sit in a special desk as a part of his therapy and he hated it. Kurt told his mother, "I would not go to middle school, she would have come to the couch to get me if that desk went with me to middle school." His favorite teacher in elementary school was his fourth-grade teacher. She "always excited about whatever she was doing even if she was having to fake it, she seemed excited about what she was doing." He remembers his least favorite teacher always correcting his handwriting. He did not like that teacher because he thought she was always focused on mistakes that were out of his control. Kurt vividly remembered his struggles from elementary school and thought that they defined his time as a young student.

The school system had four elementary schools that fed into one middle school. By the time Kurt enrolled in middle school, he no longer received special services. He recalled meeting all of the other students and said, "It was odd dealing with different personalities right away, because you had to go to six different classes, that was odd." He remembered a lot of social strife in the middle school at the time.

We had a lot of problems when I was in middle school. I stayed out of any quarrels. I typically can get along almost anybody. We had a lot of racial issues in that middle at the time. I still not quite sure why because I stayed far away from them.

The racial issues that the school was experiencing were concerning to the point that the

local churches got involved and that seemed to heal the community. Kurt's favorite teacher in middle school was one of his coaches-who got him involved in athletics. He was challenged in a good way by this teacher and also developed a love for track and field as a result of becoming involved with athletics. Kurt described his worst day of middle school as the day his mother found out that he planned to fight another student at school. "She found out what was going on that we were about to get in a fight. We are the pep rally, she comes and sits in the middle of the pep rally. Oh, that was the ugliest worst day." The best thing about the middle school Kurt attended was the teachers. They didn't always have the best instruction but "They were just really good people. They cared a lot but I mean, I think every teacher I had in that school with the exception about three or four were in their 20 plus years."

Kurt said the trend of supportive teachers continued as he transitioned to high school. He had a math teacher was very engaging and would have the students come up to the front of the classroom and work through problems with the class. His math teacher really took the time to make sure students understood how to solve the problems rather than just referring them to notes. Kurt enjoyed telling stories of himself getting paddled in high school for breaking the rules and spoke about how all the teachers and kids loved the school principal. Kurt was on the football team as well as the track and field team in high school. "The community was very involved in that like. I mean the small stadium was packed when we played football." Kurt had a couple of coaches who really made a positive impact on him as a high school student. He said:

Well, the one from track could really get on your ass but would also, let you know that he cared. The head football coach commanded respect, but also tell you how

good you are doing something, but also tell you how bad you did, and just they modeled it too. They were very professional in their own separate ways. The head coach was always put together well. He would lift with us. He would be very well-prepared. The other one, would ask me, just tell me, did you leave it home today? Because that's how you're playing, scared. Like you left them at home, get off the field. You didn't want to disappoint them.

Kurt thought there were a lot of good and engaging things the younger teachers did in his high school and he wishes they would have done more of that in all of his classes. If he were to change something about his high school, he would find a way to highlight some of those strategies for all teachers.

Kurt enrolled in college after high school, but he didn't know what degree he wanted to pursue. "I knew I wanted to get in law enforcement but I wasn't sure which field." Towards the end of completing his degree in sociology, Kurt was in the final hiring stages with the United States Border Patrol.

I woke up one morning, somebody poured the cold water of reality on me, and I was like, "I don't want to do that! In fact, I don't want to do law enforcement at all!" In a matter of a week, I'm graduating in a week. All my interviews that I have set up are with Athens-Clarke County Police, I have a teleconference interview set up with secret service, but my main thing was I was going to be hired by border patrol. So, I call them, I had to call a few different people say, I'm sorry, I need to withdraw my name from consideration.

After removing himself from consideration for the law enforcement positions, Kurt worked with the Boy Scouts of America for four months. He did not find that work to be

fulfilling and returned home to teach at his alma mater. Kurt did not feel he was prepared to begin teaching because his degree was not in education. "I didn't know what I was doing at all. They told me I was going to co-teach, I said, "What's that?" Kurt was there for one year, and experienced a big learning curve. The most difficult part was the classroom management.

I was needed every minute and it's mainly like discipline and control. So, I learned how to manage a classroom, because two of the teachers I work with . . . they knew their content and everything but they did not like, they told me they didn't like to deal with discipline, so that's what I did. I managed the classrooms, so I learned how to manage a classroom.

Kurt also remembered learning how to write IEPs on the job. He was fortunate to have someone review his work, but said he perceived himself to be extremely inadequate when creating his first few IEPs. Kurt spoke about how he would look at the blank stares of his students in that first year and the most important thing to him was to "get a kid to not feel dumb in a classroom." Kyle believes his job as a teacher is to create a plan that works for each individual in order to help them to reach their potential.

Chapter Summary

This chapter included a profile of each of the six participants selected to be interviewed for this study. These participant profiles allowed the researcher to capture the essence of each participant using their own words. The participants shared their perceptions of their lived experiences providing insight into research questions. The participants were interviewed in classrooms and offices after school. The participants shared thoughts on student achievement, their experience as a student and a teacher,

special education, and school culture among other discussion items.

Chapter V DISCUSSION OF THEMES

Students with disabilities are currently graduating a rate significantly lower than students without disabilities in the United States (Digest of Education Statistics, 2019). Far too many students with disabilities are entering post-secondary life with little or no understanding of their disability or how that disability may impact them in the future. Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) have been a requirement of the federal law under IDEA for public school students with special needs since 1975 (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The manifestation of reform linked to IDEA includes an increase in early identification, an increase in the number of students receiving services, more students receiving access to the same curriculum as their general education peers within their local schools, an increase in graduation rate of students with disabilities, and an increase in the employment rate of students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The National Center for Education Statistics reported that special education students graduated high school at a rate of 67.1 percent in 2017 while general education students graduated at a rate of 84.6 percent the same year (Digest of Education Statistics, 2019). Although graduation rates have increased since the implementation of IDEA, special education students continue to graduate at rates significantly lower than their general education counterparts despite federal legislative intervention. The purpose of this study was to examine the life and educational experiences of IDEA teachers in a public high school in Northeast Georgia with a significantly lower graduation rate for IDEA students compared to non-disabled classmates in order to determine the factors impacting IDEA graduation rates. If the student experience is understood and considered

in policy and practice, educators along with policy makers will better understand how to help students overcome the barriers that are believed to hinder IDEA students from graduating. Using qualitative methods, the researcher investigated the educational experiences of IDEA teachers in a public high school in Northeast Georgia with a significantly lower graduation rate for IDEA students compared to non-disabled classmates in order to determine the barriers impacting IDEA graduation rates in a high performing school district.

During the course of this study, participants described their experiences working with special education students. The participants were purposefully selected based on their years of experience and the students they served. Six educators were interviewed who served students under the eligibility category of SLD who attained the age of 17 prior to August 1, 2019. The group of educators consisted of two female and four male teachers. The researcher displayed the demographic information for each participant in Table 3 (below). The age of participants ranged from 37 to 43 and all of them had between 8 and 15 years of classroom teaching experience. These individuals were selected because of the researcher’s belief in their ability to provide rich data to answer the research questions based on their experience.

Table 3

Participant Demographics and Characteristics

| Participant Name | Age | Race | Years in Education | Years at Research Site |
|------------------|-----|-------|--------------------|------------------------|
| Corey | 38 | White | 15 | 5 |
| Kate | 39 | White | 8 | 8 |
| Elliot | 37 | White | 15 | 6 |

| | | | | |
|-------|----|-------|----|---|
| John | 43 | White | 20 | 4 |
| Ralph | 40 | White | 8 | 7 |
| Kurt | 35 | White | 9 | 4 |

Data for this study came from multiple sources including interviews, observations, and documents. The primary source of data was interviews focusing on teachers' experiences. The study included six participants who were interviewed three times each over the course of three months. Those interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews and field notes from observations were uploaded to MAXQDA Professional Software for Qualitative and Mixed Methods Research for data analysis. Data analysis involved three cycles of coding. During the first coding cycle the researcher marked passages based on his opinion of what was important (Maxwell, 2013). After identifying the passages, the researcher shared the identified passages with the corresponding participants via written correspondence in order to confirm if they also thought the identified passages seemed important to telling their story. This information was used to create participant profiles that presented each "the participant in context" (Seidman, 2013, p. 122). The second cycle of coding consisted of *in vivo* and process coding (Miles, et al., 2020). By using these two coding approaches with the interview data, the researcher intentionally honored the participant voices and identified the participants' perception of action in the data. During this cycle the researcher will use descriptive coding (Miles, et al., 2020) to code documents collected and created during field work. The researcher used MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software to organize and store data. The second coding cycle was used to summarize and organize segments of

data from all sources. During the third coding cycle the researcher used pattern coding to organize data from the second coding cycle into more meaningful patterns of data (Miles, et al., 2020). Pattern codes were made up of the following four summarizers: categories or themes, causes or explanations, human relationships, and concepts or theoretical constructs. These four initial summarizers were used as a guide in identifying emerging patterns in the material coded during the second cycle of coding. During this cycle, the researcher used the MAXQDA program to display the data for analytic purposes and identify emergent themes.

In this chapter, the researcher discusses 5 themes that emerged from a thorough analysis of interviews, observations, and documents. The themes discussed in this chapter are the IEP, Relationships, Motivation, Positive Practices, and Challenges. The themes and corresponding sample chunks of data are listed in Table 4.

Table 4

Sample of Data from Themes

| Theme | Sample Chunks of Data |
|--------------------|--|
| The IEP | <p>“I want this in the IEP because I don't want to have to deal with these problems again.” (Elliot)</p> <p>“I feel like through my IEPs and through our transition plans, the whole purpose is to see where do you want to be after here.” (Kate)</p> |
| Relationships | <p>“It takes a village.” (John)</p> <p>“The relationships are the biggest reason why, which is my favorite part too.” (Corey)</p> |
| Motivation | <p>“If it saved a kid from feeling dumb in the classroom then you know, I'll have to live with that.” (Kurt)</p> <p>“They were in the right class, but they would have this attitude of I don't care about the school.” (Kate)</p> |
| Positive Practices | <p>“The actual meeting will go better if there is prep work beforehand.” (Ralph)</p> |

| | |
|------------|---|
| | “There's got to be some flexibility in how a student shows that they do that.” (John) |
| Challenges | “There is a benefit to having more of like a trade school, kind of outlet because, not all of these kids are going to be academics.” (John) “Could we get a multiplier if we get a kid from the system and we get him to graduate?” (Elliot) |

The following discussion presents a rich description of the five themes that emerged from a thorough analysis of the data collected during this study.

The IEP

Since 1975, public schools have been required to develop IEPs for all students who qualify under IDEA for the purpose of providing specialized instruction to close the achievement gap between special education students and their general education counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The IEP must include the student’s current level of performance, strengths, weaknesses, goals, and special services that the student needs to receive. The IEP should be created and implemented by a team of individuals who serve the student, such as teachers, parents, and someone representing the local education agency (Hurder, 2014). Participants of this study viewed the IEP process as a central part of their students’ educational experience. When reflecting on the function of the IEP, they discussed their view of the how the IEP should function as well as other stakeholders on the team.

When discussing the IEP Elliot stated, “I think the IEP is wildly important, we've got to have that.” Elliot spoke about how it was challenging when other stakeholders did not understand the purpose of the IEP. He saw it as a means of leveling the playing field

for a student with a disability and of creating fairness within the educational setting.

When describing conversations he had with parents, he said the following:

This IEP is something that's designed for us to help in your child's education, for us to address issues that arise from their disability, but it's not designed to make anything easier. It's not designed to make something go away. At least in my opinion, it's designed for us to make sure that your child is being treated fairly.

They're getting an equal education.

Elliot also spoke about the importance of educating parents on their role in the IEP process. He lamented that he sometimes believed parents and teachers were frustrated and would just see the IEP as an opportunity to remove barriers to make things easier.

I think sometimes people get lost in what the IEP is, and the parent or sometimes it's teachers going, "Well, I don't want this in the IEP because it's going to be more work for me," or parents saying, "I want this in the IEP because I don't want to have to deal with these problems again."

He stressed that everyone needed to understand that the IEP was not a "cure" and that the team needed to work together to teach the student to compensate for their disability.

Elliot thought it was important for students to understand their disability and to be engaged with the IEP process. Some participants discussed the IEP in the context of all students needing to meet the same educational standards. Kurt believed that a student could master a given standard in a number of different ways, "That's why it's called an individual education plan. You got to look at the kid, and say here's the standard. What can I do to the standard to give them a clear path." He explained that assessments can be

changed without changing the level of difficulty. When giving an example of assessment Kurt said,

I'm still making them do something but showing their ability in a different way. I mean, with math, I mean, what bothers our kids most of the time I feel is when they have an assessment put in front of them and they see 32 problems. All they're thinking of is, "I have to do 32 problems, I can't do three." They have the flexibility that should be provided for students to demonstrate mastery in multiple ways.

When speaking about how some of his co-workers accomplish this he said, "They try to balance out test achievement with assignments that if you just complete them, it can balance out poor test scores and you could still pass the class." He spoke about the tension that sometimes exists between special education teachers and general education teachers with regard to assessing students as individuals rather than as a group or class.

Ralph gave an example of conversations that he has had in the past with colleagues:

Man, if you would just count their test scores for all these zeros on missing assignment work. I mean, like I had a student who made it like an eighty-four on the ninth-grade literature milestone. I mean, it's hard to get an eighty-four, but ended up with a 50 something in the class.

Ralph believed that each student should have an individualized educational experience and they should be given multiple ways to demonstrate their knowledge. He stressed the whole purpose of the IEP was to give the student an opportunity to learn in a different way because the student had a disability that had an adverse impact on her or his education. He thought all teachers should be working together to create a personal

learning plan for the student and no one was advocating that they “just skip their work” but they should be able to utilize test scores as a demonstration of mastery if the student has shown that have mastered the content mastery. Ralph believed there was a compromise that educators could find with regard to the balance of grading tests and classroom assignments and their overall grade should reflect what they know rather than how much work they did. He also said students should not be prevented from earning a course credit if they could demonstrate they had mastered the necessary content. Kurt also addressed the struggles he faced at times explaining accommodations that needed to be in place for his students to other teachers. He described an interaction that he had with a fellow teacher by sharing, “I’ve explained to them, ‘Hey, Chris doesn't need to write these notes, he needs to read them as you're going through them and then at the end he needs a copy of them.’ I got, ‘No!’ several times.” Kurt demonstrated his frustration in still having to have these conversations with his colleagues by saying, “Those types of conversations happened multiple times and can still happen to this day.”

Ralph believed that the most beneficial part of the IEP for the student was the transition plan. The transition plan is the part of the IEP that specifically identifies post-secondary goals of the student and outlines a plan to acquire the necessary skills to achieve those goals. He described the transition plan as a means for a student’s case manager to really get to know the student and to understand what the student wanted to do after high school graduation. All of the participants described the IEP as a benefit to teachers and students. They all believed when implemented correctly by all stakeholders in a student’s academic environment, the IEP served as a supportive plan that contributed to a student’s academic success. Kate echoed Ralph’s feelings about the connection

between the IEP and students' post-secondary goals by stating, "I feel like through my IEPs and through our transition plans, the whole purpose is to see where do you want to be after here." She believed that the IEP should be student-driven and based on choices that needed to be made by the student in terms of their personal career path.

Relationships

Relationships was a theme that came up throughout the interviews and were mentioned in several different contexts. Participants discussed relationships with their students and the families they served. IDEA was enacted in part to foster a relationship between parents and schools to facilitate equal access to educational opportunities for students with disabilities (Fish, 2008). Participants of this study expressed that strong working relationships had a direct impact on their effectiveness as special educators as well as student success.

All of the participants acknowledged the importance of building relationships with their students during interviews. Elliot mentioned that some students need their teachers to be involved in their lives at a deeper level than others. He also believed that some students would be open and easier to get to know than others, but it was his job to "dig" for that information. Elliot said that the students at the site were at times more "transactional" in their relationships with staff because they had a lot of parental involvement and support, however there were others who came from "tougher" backgrounds who really needed their teacher to provide additional support. Elliot was clear that teachers needed to have constructive relationships with students because they would need to correct them at times. When speaking about critiquing students, Elliot said, "You have to build that relationship because in a classroom setting I'm going to have to

be critical of you, at some point I'm going to have to critique what you're doing." Elliot said strong relationships with students led to teachers being able to provide consistency to their students and give them a sense of what to expect. He advocated for small classes because they made it easier to know his students on a personal level. Elliot thought the adults in the school were central to the student experience and expressed this sentiment by saying, "You cannot have enough positive adult role models in your life between the ages of five and eighteen, you just can't." Elliot shared that he knows everyone has "baggage" that they carry with them and teachers have to understand that students are people first. Kurt approached his relationships with students by seeking first to understand. He pointed out that students noticed the difference between "speaking to" them as opposed to "fussing at" them. He also described how other teachers may at times unknowingly make it difficult to develop good rapport with students by saying, "They thought any time I corrected them, that I was trying to argue. When usually there are some people that fussed at them, but I was trying to talk to you just to figure out why you're doing this." Kurt shared that he never puts instruction before the student's emotional well-being. He described this in the context of working with a student he perceived did not "like" him giving the following anecdote about an interaction with that student,

He didn't like me to begin with. I took him out into the hall one day and I said "Listen, you can act like this, or you can shake my hand like a man because your man now. We can go back inside and we can decide we're going to do this together and get through this or we can keep dancing this dance." And he stood right there for second and he shook my hand and we went back inside.

This event exemplified the respect that Kurt thought should be afforded to students and the role that they should play in their own learning. He also experienced the impact that factors in students' personal lives had on their performance in school and saw teachers' relationships with students as a way to assist them in overcoming adversity. He recalled one class where he taught four female students who were all pregnant at the time. He was proud that all of them eventually graduated and believed that it was partly due to the trust that they had built with the educators in the school. When asked why kids with special needs are successful at his school, Kurt said that the teachers understood each student on an "individual" level and worked hard to meet the needs of each student who required specialized instruction. John also emphasized the importance of how teachers approached students on a personal level. He modeled his approach after a mentor that he once had and thought that it was important to show a certain "respect" to students. He was driven to teach due to the connections that he could build with students more so than teaching the content. When describing his school John said, "The reputation of the school comes from the experiences that those kids come home with from every day, experiences with those good and bad teachers." His belief was that teachers were going to have a significant impact on student success and that could be positive or negative one. His experience as a student taught him students should be nurtured by all of the adults in their lives and teachers should find something unique in each student to connect with them.

This sentiment was illustrated when John said:

I had a teacher that (sic) gave me some attention that I didn't really think I deserved, but he saw something in me. It kind of just kind of clicked. So, I was probably lost and just enjoying being more social at school than worrying about

academics. Then all of a sudden, I saw that academics were important. So, I just try to be that change for kids.

Ralph also discussed the importance of having a deep relationship with students. Similar to John, Ralph said that teachers should be expected to “go above and beyond” to identify what peripheral challenges students may be facing and assist them in overcoming them. Ralph also spoke of the responsibility of teachers to make sure that students’ experience at school would either supplement the support they were receiving at home or help them to overcome the challenges that they would bring from their home environment. He believed that part of his job was to convince students that regardless of how they compared to others, they could find an individual path to success. Corey was asked why students are successful and replied, “The relationships are the biggest reason why, which is my favorite part too. Getting to know these kids as kids is so fun and knowing that they're actually like little human beings.” She told stories of students “opening up” to teachers to overcome challenges and how rewarding those moments were for her personally. All of the participants shared strong beliefs of the importance of having deep and developed relationships with their students but also believed there were other relationships that were central factors in student success.

Kate detailed how her principal instilled the mantra “everyone has a story” into the staff. This mantra spoke to the value of building relationships with other stakeholders in students’ lives. She expressed that teachers should make sure that students knew they were “loved” at school and in order to do that, other stakeholders must be included in what was taking place at school. Corey shared that communication with parents was extremely valuable and necessary to engage families in the learning process. She stated

that she tried to keep parents informed of successes just as much as difficulties that students were having at school. Ralph described the grace that is sometimes afforded to teachers as the result of keeping an open line of communication with parents. He acknowledged that special education teachers have many additional responsibilities when compared to their general education counterparts and that mistakes were inevitable. His approach to overcoming that challenge was to contact the parent and let them know that a mistake was made. Ralph said, "I think that means a lot to parent when you call them and admit the mistake and tell them how are you going to fix it. I think most parents and the overwhelming majority really respect that." His experience revealed that most parents would work with teachers to keep them in "compliance" as long as they worked to build trust with the family. John very simply said, "It takes a village," when discussing engaging parents in the education process. He did not think that students could reach their full potential without getting parental input throughout the process. He believed that everyone who held a stake in a students' life had some responsibility for "raising" that person. He also shared that one of the biggest challenges to overcome for students was their "family dynamics." In his experience, when students did not earn a high school diploma, it was largely due to factors outside of the school. From his point of view, success at his school was facilitated by a high level of support from parents who brought a sense of "community" around the school. Kyle believed that strong working relationships with parents were more important for students with disabilities relative to other students and expressed this belief by saying, "There's one place where a lot of fights can take place and that is in special ed and if you can't communicate and form a good relationship with the parent then they're not going to hide a negative feeling." Elliot

also stressed the importance of getting to know the families of his students and believed that it correlated directly with his effectiveness as an educator. He discussed an experience he had with a student who was in his class who he coached previously on a youth athletic team. The mother of the student was very distrustful of the school and would often berate teachers in meetings using profane language to express her dissatisfaction. Elliot described how he overcame that situation by leveraging his prior relationship with the family to coach the mother on a more productive way to work with the school. When asked how he built a relationship with the mother, Elliot said, “She knew I would call when he did something good and I’m sure she was very happy to hear that.” Participants believed that having open and frequent communication with families served them well in their roles as special educators.

Relationships were viewed by all of the participants as important and central to their effectiveness as educators. They all expressed intentionality with regard to developing relationships with students and families in their work. They believed that their ability to lead educational efforts of individuals was directly impacted by the depth of understanding that they had for the overall student experience which extended well beyond the doors of the school.

Motivation

Motivation can be defined as the force that drives an individual to behave in a way that would further their goals (Hamdi, 2018). Ryan and Deci (2000) developed self-determination theory (SDT) and identified relatedness, competence, and autonomy as individual needs that must be met to develop self-determination. The theorists were concerned with intrinsic motivation as well as how it could be influenced by external

factors (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The participants in this study discussed external factors and how they might shape students' confidence or beliefs that they could complete a certain task or experience overall success. They also discussed who the student holds most responsible for their individual success and how a student's belief intersects with their practice as educators.

Throughout the interviews, participants shared their experience with balancing the successes and failures of students with disabilities. When speaking about the students he served, Kurt expressed that teachers needed to make sure that the students did not “feel dumb” or that they were any lesser of a student during instruction. He was adamant that his students might be different, but they did not have any less potential than other students. Kurt believed that he needed to help his students see that they could find success, but their path might need to be a different one than other students. Kurt gave an example of how this unfolded in practice by describing how he identified students who might be having difficulty with a concept in math class and took them into another room to find out specifically where the confusion was so he could explain it to the student. Kurt acknowledged that this took more time but justified the use of the time by saying, “If it saved a kid from feeling dumb in the classroom then you know, I'll have to live with that.” He also discussed the idea of balancing adversity with success for students. From his perspective, that balance was important to make sure the student would not “give up” on completing school. An example was given in the context of graduation when Kurt said, “I had to stop looking at it in terms of getting them through in four years because if I tried to load that up in four years, then everything is going to collapse.” He believed adversity was a good thing and happened naturally through the school experience, but he

also knew all people had their breaking point and too much adversity could “crush a kid” and cause the student to “shut down.”

John described his intentions of creating success through the lens of differentiating assignments with students. He recalled a reading assignment in which students were asked to synthesize information they had previously read by answering some questions at the end of the assignment. John shared that the students reading materials contained all of the same pertinent information but were written for audiences on different reading levels. All students could comprehend the material and demonstrate mastery on the assessment despite not all having the same ability level in reading. John believed that all students, especially those who typically “struggled” should be able to experience success at school. Elliot spoke about the importance of “delivering good news” to his students. His experience taught him that students expected teachers to point it out when they are “not performing right” because it was important to reinforce and celebrate success with students. Elliot wanted his students to realize that they were just as capable “as that kid or another kid.”

Ralph suggested that the overarching goal of the school was to create an environment that gave students the opportunity to experience success by overcoming their deficits and weaknesses. He exemplified the balance of adversity with success by saying the “darkest of times usually come before something really good happens” and he believed that it was his job to ensure that he created opportunity for the “good” to happen. Ralph told a story about a student who he worked closely with throughout high school and how much it meant to her and her family that he acknowledged her success. His department chose a student to award at the end of each year and they chose this

particular student at the end of her senior year. As her teacher, Ralph was asked to speak at the ceremony and present the award. He recalled going up on the stage and speaking from the heart or “winging it” as he described. Ralph didn’t know it at the time, but while he was speaking, his principal was watching the family and noticed tears streaming down the faces of the student and her parents. The principal then went back to his office and emailed the faculty to describe the impact that positive reinforcement had on that entire family. Ralph believed the story was a great example of the balance between adversity and success, because the student experienced success and it meant more to her and her family because she had to overcome adversity to achieve it.

Kate discussed motivation from the perspective of the student by describing students who she taught who did not have family who graduated from high school. She recalled the common refrain of “My mama doesn’t need an education and I don’t either.” That was a factor that she perceived was difficult to overcome because it was a “cycle that students can’t see beyond.” She gave a specific example of a math class where it was particularly difficult because students had the outlook of not needing education, but at the same time “felt dumb” for having to be in that level of class. Kate said,

They knew what they were doing and they knew what everybody else and their friends were doing. And I think they were in the right class, but they would have this attitude of “I don't care about the school” to cover up the fact that they couldn't do the math. That might be why they were trying to say, "I don't need this." Because they didn't want to face the reality that they didn't know how to do it yet.

When asked to share a specific example of how she approached that situation, Kate smiled and said, “Stickers.” She described how she would put stickers on their papers when they solved problems correctly and the students enjoyed that. She said eventually they would peel them off of their papers and place them on their binders so they could “brag” about their collection. Corey’s experience led her to believe that some kids just do not like school and they are not going to “magically” wake up one day and love it. She believed her students did love the teachers at her school and said, “We have a lot of control over how a kid’s day is going to turn out.” Participants believed they had a responsibility to set students up for success, but also thought other stakeholders bore some responsibility for ensuring the success of students with disabilities.

The educators discussed the pressure they were under for ensuring that their students had the supports in place for them to be successful at school and how it could feel overwhelming at times. They also believed that there were other people including the student who had responsibility in ensuring high school graduation for their students. Elliot recalled being a teenager himself and how he did not always make decisions that his parents or teachers would have wanted him to make; “Who's that an indictment of? Probably more of an indictment of me.” He counterbalanced that thought however, by telling the researcher about the deference he held for his responsibility to ensure that his students graduated. He shared that it “still stings” if he hears that his students did not find success after high school.

According to Kurt, approximately half of the students who he taught took on the ownership of their individual success in school. When the half of students who didn’t take ownership, experienced failure they usually placed the blame for their failure on the

fact that they did not try or the teacher treated them unfairly. He also thought the lack of student ownership could negatively affect students' post-secondary outcomes by fostering the belief that they were "dragged" through school. He said sometimes students expressed "this doesn't even feel like my diploma." In Kurt's experience, the same proportion of parents nurtured the belief that it was ultimately the student's responsibility to earn a high school diploma. He said that some parents would express that their student was in high school and it was time for the student to assume the responsibility of "passing or failing" while others were more inclined to believe if their student was failing, it had to be the result of the school not accommodating the student properly.

John illustrated this perspective by describing a newspaper cartoon that portrayed schools in the 1960s compared to the schools of today. In the cartoon of the 1960s there was a family in the principal's office and the parents were pointing at the student while discussing poor performance. Pictured adjacent to that portrayal was a similar cartoon but instead of the parents pointing at the student, they were pointing at the teacher. With regard to post-secondary outcomes, John believed the involvement students had with their IEP and coursework correlated positively with their success after graduation. Ralph said the question he got the most from parents was about what accommodations he could put into place for students. He was not bothered at all by having discussions with parents about accommodations, but thought it was important to make sure that parents understood the students also needed to "meet the teachers halfway." Ralph said, "If you'll just put in effort and give the teachers everything you got, we will find a way to get you a diploma." This was another example of the counterbalance that Elliot discussed.

Ralph also believed there was blame unfairly directed towards teachers by students and parents when a student was not experiencing success. Corey shared this sentiment with her colleagues. She described the teachers as “scapegoats” but really accredited them with putting the necessary supports in place for students to be successful. She has also taught students who have increased their work ethic when becoming more involved in their IEP. She said some students really worked hard to understand how to overcome their disability while some seemed to be waiting to see how much the teacher would do for them. Ralph also had the perspective that being a high-performing school helped to encourage students to take more ownership of their learning. He said when students looked around and saw the level at which their peers were performing, they wanted to perform better for themselves.

Participants had a shared value of a team approach when discussing how to manage external factors that influenced a student’s performance at school. They all believed that they had played an important role in students achieving success, however there are other stakeholders who had central roles as well. As the motivation theme emerged from analysis of interviews, it became clear that teachers saw value in being open with their students about strengths, weaknesses and how to overcome those weaknesses. While they acknowledged the essential role they played as special educators, they also pointed to the student’s work ethic as an important factor for success.

Positive Practices

The educators interviewed for this study had 75 years of collective experience teaching students with disabilities. They all had their own beliefs of what practices facilitated student success and what schools should attempt to replicate and build upon to

increase their efficacy. These practices ranged from systemic practices that were applied to the whole school to strategies they would be responsible for implementing as the teachers in their respective classrooms. Participants believed that their school was doing many things well and appreciated the way they were able to support students and their families.

All of the participants believed that consistency was important for their students and valued practices that promoted consistency within the school. Elliot mentioned that this was particularly important when it came to the master schedule. He described a previous experience of working in a school that was on a rotating schedule. He defined the rotating schedule as a schedule in which the classes were offered at different times every day throughout the week, for example math class would be at 8:00 a.m. on Monday and 10:00 a.m. on Tuesday and continued to change times throughout the week. Elliot appreciated the schedule at his current school because every class was at the same time every day. The master schedule of the site consisted of four academic classes each day with most students completing the same for classes at the same time each day for the length of the semester. Some students were on a year-long schedule for some classes where they would alternate every other day for the entire year to complete two courses.

Another example of a practice that led to consistency was teachers who “moved up” with students each year. For example, teachers would teach different courses each year in the same sequence in which the students enrolled in them, so that the students would be taught by the same instructor for multiple courses as they matriculated through high school. Elliot clarified “moving up” did not happen in all departments but it was something that he thought should be replicated. Elliot believed that staffing consistency

was a contributing factor to a successful school. He described one of the benefits of the research site was that a large majority of the staff were retained from year to year. This allowed for teachers to work with the same families for a number of years as siblings advance through school.

John discussed how important it was to have consistency in the administration as well as the teachers' ranks in order to have the school maintain the pursuit of their mission and vision. He remembered working at his previous school and experiencing a "revolving door" of school principals. He found that time to be frustrating because with every new leader came new initiatives, and this made it difficult to reach his goals. He compared that situation with the research site where he has only had one principal and has worked with the same biology teacher every year. When asked how he perceived the consistency in his current environment, John said, "It's pretty great. I work with coach Jack most of the day and he's been a teacher that (sic) I've worked with probably twice a semester for all four years that I've been here." John really enjoyed the relationship that he was able to build with his colleague and the planning they were able to accomplish as a result of working so closely together.

Ralph expanded on the staff consistency by explaining how teachers need to be predictable. He remembered a former mentor to him and described her by saying, "She knew her content. Every day she came in with an expectation. She would not argue with people. She was not rough, I mean she joked with them but she was very knowledgeable and very consistent with everything." Participants also believed they could increase efficacy within the school by making sure members of each IEP team were prepared and knew what to expect from the process.

Being prepared to lead the IEP team was a value expressed by the participants interviewed during the study. Richard stated, “The actual meeting will go better if there is prep work beforehand.” He described the “prep work” as crafting a meeting structure where each person played a specific role and knew how the role they played fit into the meeting. He would then explain to the parents and students what each individual’s role would be for the meeting. He believed the best practice would be to meet briefly with the educators on the team before the IEP meeting to make sure they understood their roles so it would be a positive experience for the parents. However, he admitted it was difficult to dedicate the time to do so in every instance.

Corey discussed preparation from the instructional point of view. As a new special education teacher, she credits the collaboration with colleagues as the best practice that prepared her to serve her students. When discussing her early experience as an educator, she described a new teacher induction program designed specifically for special education teachers. She said,

I remember having a really good mentor teacher and they made every first-year teacher go through their mentor program. I thought it was a pain at the beginning, but I realize now that it was probably the best thing that I've ever done because we had these monthly meetings. We had to read books and go through this whole process but it was just for SPED teachers.

As Corey matured as a professional educator, she continued to value collaboration with her colleagues and believed that it was a necessity to increase the quality of instruction. She remembered how she and her colleagues collaborated at a previous point in her career and how beneficial it was to all of their instruction. Corey described how

each of them would work together to deconstruct each standard and plan to teach the standard to different ability levels. She then contrasted that with her experience working with teachers who had different feelings about collaborating with special education teachers. She expressed frustration with teachers who were not good teaching partners by saying, “When you know someone just can't collaborate and co-teach with someone else and it's not that equal relationship then just don't give him or her a co-teacher.” Corey’s experience at the site included both positive and negative experiences with co-teachers, and she believed that the administration should identify teams that worked well together and prioritize pairing those teams when creating the master schedule.

Teachers also believed strategies that were completely under their control were important for student success. John said that the most important part of any school are the teachers. They have the most control over what the students will get from their experience at school. He discussed assessment and trying to give students an opportunity to leverage their individual talents to demonstrate their mastery of content. He did not think students should be judged by standardized tests in isolation. Ralph agreed with John’s perspective by saying, “They are supposed to be mastering the standards. You know, I've got standards for each class. Well, there's got to be some flexibility in how a student shows that they (sic) do that.” Ralph also believed that early intervention was a key to student success. He believed it was essential to identify what a student would struggle with early on in any course so the teacher could craft a path forward for that student. Elliot expanded on intervention and said that it needed to happen from a young age with all teachers and parents. He wished that there were more resources created which helped parents to become more engaged in their children’s education from birth

until the time they entered school. Kurt spoke more specifically about intervention from the perspective of differentiating for students. He discussed drilling down to different “ability levels” and providing individualized instruction. Differentiation could manifest in several different ways such as adapted formatting or different activities designed for specific students or groups of students.

The participants had many experiences throughout the course of their careers and were confident in discussing the successful practices they have experienced. They were happy in their current setting and thought they were supported by their colleagues. They believed that there were systemic practices that were contributing to the success of the students in their school and drew on previous experiences to put those practices into context. They also shared frustrations they had with regard to the student experience and how they affected overall outcomes for their students.

Challenges

The educators interviewed for this study perceived several challenges that affected the student experience. All of the participants were veteran educators and shared what they believed to be hindrances for students, families, and educators as students matriculated through school. Most of the frustrations expressed by teachers were systemic in nature, and the teachers perceived they had little or no control over implementing the change that they would like to see to improve the student experience. Although the educators interviewed for this study believed their school was doing a great job, they still encountered challenges that could be overcome in order to meet the needs of their students better.

The way schools were evaluated was a common frustration among participants. High stakes testing was not perceived to be helpful for reason previously discussed and the timeframe put on graduation was also a problem according to teachers. Elliot said, “High stakes testing makes teachers crazy.” John believed the test “added unneeded stress to students and teachers.” They both elaborated that they just did not feel that it was an accurate measure of knowledge and certainly not talent. The educators believed the expectation for all students to graduate in four years created a perception of success that was unrealistic for some students. Elliot told a story about writing his legislator about this sentiment,

I remember asking a state legislator once, “Could you do me a favor?” I said, “Could we get a multiplier if we get a kid from the system and we get him to graduate? If we get a kid who takes six years or seven years.” So, I mean I think sometimes you have to look at it as a case by case basis. There are kids we have to put a ton of work into to get them across the stage, and that doesn’t get reflected if we don’t get them across the stage in four years.

Elliot thought the persistent focus on graduation rate in high school served as a discouragement to some of the students he served. He said what is being communicated to students at his school is that “over 98 percent” of the students were earning their diploma in four years so it created an environment where students who may need to take longer perceived themselves to be inadequate.

Kurt said, “Graduation is a very narrow pathway. We need to look at how we can how we can get them through by accommodating in different ways.” He believed that the opportunities after high school were endless and we should not be forcing students to fit

into such a small “box.” Much like Elliot’s anecdote about his letter to his legislator, Kyle said, “I feel like the state does education a disservice by counting a kid with an IEP a dropout if they don’t graduate in four years.” Kurt thought it was unfair to label a student a dropout if the student didn’t graduate in four years but were still trying to earn a diploma in a longer period of time. He shared a story of a student he previously worked with who dropped out because he knew he could not earn the needed credits to graduate in four years. Kurt wished that he could have worked with that particular student as a freshman and set a different expectation from the beginning of school.

Ralph weighed in on the culture of graduating in four years by saying, “No parent ever wants to hear that dreaded fifth year.” He thought many students and parents perceived the student either needed to graduate in four years or drop out, and that there were no other options. Ralph’s perspective was that the student just needed to graduate and it didn’t matter how long it took. He even joked that he was on the “five-year plan” as a college student. Corey agreed that four years may not be the best plan for everybody. She said it made her ask, “Why are we killing ourselves and our students for four years when in the grand scheme of the student’s post-secondary outcomes, it should not matter.” She implied that it mattered to the school and how it was assessed more so than to the student. The expectation of graduating in four years was a challenge that impacted other factors that educators perceived to be hindering their ability to offer individualized experiences for students.

All of the participants discussed the choices and opportunities available to students at the school. Kate believed that students were not given enough options through public education and said,

I think that options give us the flexibility for them to be successful in different settings. I think that one thing that would help our kids is having a vocational track. I think not having the different tracks hurts because everyone's not a college type of kid.

She knew some of her students intended to go to the work force after high school and believed the school system was missing an opportunity to prepare them better for a field of work. She also believed giving students more choices for vocational training while in school would empower them to be responsible for their own path.

John agreed with Kate by saying, “There is a benefit to having more of like a trade school, kind of outlet because, not all of these kids are going to be academics.” He also advocated for a vocational diploma option for students but said that the school could do better with the current options by offering more “hands on” opportunities to apply content from their classrooms in “real-world” settings. Elliot believed that John’s perspective of “hands on” opportunities should extend into the realm of extra-curricular activities.

Elliot was a coach and enjoyed coaching athletics but wished that there were more opportunities for students to find career interest in an organized manner outside of the school day. Ralph recalled a time in his career when the vocational diploma option was offered to students and remembered that students appeared to be more engaged and included in the school. He regretted that he currently believed he has students who would choose to pursue that option and be successful, however they will probably transfer to an alternative school or drop out like students in the past have done. All of the participants expressed that students should be afforded more options and while it was noble to expect

every student to be qualified to go to college when they completed high school, some students should have the option to choose a different path for themselves.

Another challenge brought up by educators throughout the interviews was a lack of human resources needed to maximize the impact of special educators on their students. Kurt believed that special education teachers were “spread too thin” due to their teaching responsibilities coupled with their duties with regard to the IEP process. He said that special education teachers should be hired to teach and schools should have additional staff to assist with paperwork and write IEPs for students. Ralph discussed the “overwhelming” responsibility for special educators to keep up with IEPs and the immense pressure on them to stay in compliance. He defended special educators by saying,

Just because a teacher missed something doesn't that mean that they're not a good special ed teacher. I would argue that, just because you missed a date, doesn't mean you're not outstanding. You might be doing an outstanding job in your environment. The program that you're developing for the students are appropriate and they're working. It is not worth losing a good special education teacher because there was some sort of arbitrary date.

Elliot gave a different example of the lack of human resources by describing a classroom with 32 students and 13 of whom were students with IEPs. He struggled to explain how to overcome the challenges brought about by the students in that classroom and explained how the situation was even further complicated by not having adequate time to plan for instruction during the workday. His frustration boiled over when he said, “We all know what we signed up for. We all knew we were never going to make what we were worth.”

Participants all expressed how stressful their responsibilities were and how much they were complicated by also being charged with leading each of their students' teams through the IEP process.

Chapter Summary

The graduation rate for students served in special education is significantly lower than students who are not eligible for special education services in The United States (Digest of Education Statistics, 2019). The purpose of this study was to examine the life and educational experiences of IDEA teachers in a public high school in Northeast Georgia with a significantly lower graduation rate for IDEA students compared to non-disabled classmates in order to determine the factors impacting IDEA graduation rates so that the student experience could be better understood and considered in developing policy and practice. During the course of this study, participants described their experience working with special education students. In this chapter, the researcher discussed themes of the IEP, Relationships, Motivation, Positive Practices, and Challenges that emerged from a thorough analysis of interviews, observations, and documents.

Chapter VI

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Since 1975, IDEA has shaped the educational experience of students with disabilities in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Despite legislative intervention, students continue to graduate at a rate far lower than their non-disabled counterparts. IDEA is aimed at providing students with special needs an education that is equitable to their general education peers (Digest of Education Statistics, 2019). The purpose of this study was to examine the life and educational experiences of teachers of IDEA students at a public high school in Northeast Georgia with a significantly lower graduation rate for IDEA students compared to non-disabled classmates to determine the policies and practices impacting IDEA graduation rates.

By understanding the policies and practices that impact graduation in a Georgia public high school with a significantly lower graduation rate for IDEA students compared to classmates, educators could be better equipped to implement policies and practices that would close the gap in graduation rates for IDEA students. IDEA was implemented with the intent to include students with disabilities in the same settings and offer equal educational opportunities relative to their peers, yet IDEA students are still falling short of earning a high school diploma. If the student experience is better understood and contextualized, educators along with policymakers would be able to infer how to help students overcome the barriers believed to hinder IDEA students from graduating.

The following research questions were addressed in the study:

1. What are the life and educational experiences of identified special education teachers serving a public high school in Northeast Georgia with a lower graduation rate for special education students compared to non-disabled classmates?
2. What strategies and practices do identified special education teachers perceive are impacting special education student graduation rates at a public high school in Northeast Georgia with a lower graduation rate for special education students compared to non-disabled classmates?
3. What policies do identified special education teachers perceive are impacting special education student graduation rates at a public high school in Northeast Georgia with a lower graduation rate for special education students compared to non-disabled classmates?

In the findings, the researcher revealed that participants regarded the following as the most influential factors impacting high school graduation for special education students: consistency, preparation, individualization, evaluation, choice, and human resources.

The researcher purposefully selected the participants based on their years of teaching experience and the students they served. Data for this study came from multiple sources including interviews, observations, and documents. The primary source of data was interviews of the six participants focused on their experiences. Those interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews and field notes from observations were uploaded to MAXQDA Professional Software for Qualitative and Mixed Methods Research for data analysis. The researcher implemented three cycles of coding and

revealed five themes which were discussed in detail in Chapter 5. Those themes were the IEP, Relationships, Motivation, Positive Practices, and Challenges. The researcher discusses these themes in the context of the research questions, limitations of the study, implications, recommendations for future research, and the final conclusions in this chapter.

Research Questions: Summary Discussion

The study included the shared experiences of six participants who were interviewed by the researcher three times each over the course of two months. The researcher collected data for this study and provided a rich and detailed description of participant perspectives on what policies and practices impacted the graduation rate of IDEA students. In this section, the researcher discusses the research questions that guided this study and how they align with the literature, and the five themes that emerged from the data.

RQ1: What are the life and educational experiences of identified special education teachers serving a public high school in Northeast Georgia with a lower graduation rate for special education students compared to non-disabled classmates?

Understanding the life experiences of the participants through their personal history can provide context and clarity for how they interpret their environment (Seidman, 2013). To address RQ1, information was drawn from the narrative profiles created for each participant. To construct the profiles, the researcher coded what was of interest and shared those passages with the respective participants. After verifying the passages that were important to tell each participant's story, the researcher constructed a narrative profile of each participant in the study using the participant's own words. All of

the participants in the study had differences in their backgrounds, however, there were also many similarities between them. Three of them were born and raised in Georgia, while three were originally from other states. All six were White and were raised in communities where education was valued. The participants described their childhood as normal. Kate had the most distinctive experience because her family shared their home with foster children throughout her formative years. Her parents both went to college and worked as public-school educators. She lived with 34 different foster sisters for ten years during her childhood. Corey lived at an amusement park during part of her childhood, because it also was the family business. John resided with his father in Florida who worked six days a week. His grandmother assumed the parenting role while his father was at work. Kurt, Elliot, and Ralph all described traditional childhoods in two-parent households. The parents of the participants were all described as hard workers who viewed education as a pathway to better outcomes.

Kurt, Corey, Kate, and Elliot all experienced special services of some kind during their K-12 education. Kurt received special services in speech to address his speech impediment and occupational therapy to address his handwriting. He described the feeling of being singled out by giving two main examples. The first was when he was often pulled out of recess to have time with his speech teacher. He recalled being on the playground while his teacher yelled in front of all of the other students that it was time for speech. The second example was his description of a special desk he had to use in class when all of the other students had a normal desk. He said he hated that desk and would try to avoid sitting in it if he could. Kate also received speech services for a speech impediment and described being separated from the other students. She explained that the

reason she didn't like speech was because she had to leave her classmates. Elliot began receiving special services in middle school for his learning deficits. He was put on medication to address those deficits and also received academic support but discontinued the medication in high school. His parents expected him to put forth his best effort academically, but also wanted him to be involved in extracurricular activities and have diverse experiences. Ralph and John did not receive any special services, but they along with the other participants were able to describe the qualities of the teacher who had the biggest impact on them as they matriculated through school.

During interviews, participants discussed their memories of their favorite teachers and why they perceived them as effective. They remembered their best teachers were caring, provided structured environments, and tried to make learning applicable for the students. Corey described her first-grade teacher as caring and credited the teacher with inspiring her career choice. Elliot had a teacher in college who met with him and explained he would be grading him based on his ability level, which was perceived to be better than average. He remembered how it made a positive impact on him and make that teacher stand out as someone who, "made him want to get into teaching." John remembered a high school teacher who would recognize students in the announcements and it made him "feel important." Ralph had a teacher who had very high expectations while still managing to be "likable." Elliot recalled a teacher who provided a very structured environment by applying an appropriate pace of instruction that led to higher student engagement. Kurt said that his favorite elementary school teacher was enthusiastic and seemed to be excited about everything which made the class "fun." The participants in this study were all impacted by their best teachers and several of them

were inspired to enter the field of education due to the impact of those individuals.

The educators who participated in this study had been teaching for several years when they were interviewed, but some had less traditional routes to the classroom than others. Corey, Kate, and John all majored in special education and completed teacher preparatory programs in college. Elliot and Ralph changed majors to get into education at some point during their college years. Kurt went to college and planned to enter the field of law enforcement. He realized quickly that he did not want to work in that field and eventually got a teaching job after working briefly with The Boy Scouts of America. All of the participants were married with their own children when they participated in the interviews for the study.

RQ2: What strategies and practices do identified special education teachers perceive are impacting special education student graduation rates at a public high school in Northeast Georgia with a lower graduation rate for special education students compared to non-disabled classmates?

The participants in this study collectively represented 75 years of experience in teaching students with disabilities, and they provided rich descriptions of their practice throughout the interviews. In the theme titled the IEP, participants discussed how important it was to utilize the IEP as the centerpiece for a special education student's curricular experience. Elliot described the IEP as a tool designed to help the team of educators and other stakeholders working with each student to address the issues that arose due to the student's disability. He believed the IEP helped to make sure students with disabilities were treated fairly.

The idea of fairness was a catalyst for federal education laws beginning with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The law made it illegal to discriminate in public places which eventually led to court decisions addressing the role of public education and serving students with disabilities (Herzik, 2015; Rotatori et al., 2011; Stathis, 2014). The IEP was also used by the participants as a means to educate other stakeholders on how to address the individual needs of each student. Elliot believed that parents needed to understand an IEP was not meant to make things less challenging for students but rather intended to be a plan to teach them how to cope with their disability. Kurt explained the impact of the IEP through the lens of assessment. He believed that students could demonstrate what they knew in a number of different ways and the IEP could be utilized as a way to give the student a “clear path” to mastery. Participants also said that they had a responsibility to educate other teachers on individual student needs related to the IEP so they would understand how to implement an individualized plan for each of their students. In the review of literature for this study, the researcher documented a history of general education teachers being averse to including special education students in their classrooms (Cook, et al., 1999; Cook, 2001; Cook, et al., 2002; Frolin, et al., 1996). Gaines and Barnes (2017) suggested the aversion might be addressed by professional development aimed at improving teacher efficacy which could reduce stress levels in teachers. Ralph echoed Kurt’s belief about the purpose of the IEP, which was to create an individualized experience for each student. He thought all teachers should work together to implement an individualized plan for each student. The participants all believed the process to create and implement the IEP was instrumental in their practice as special educators, and it was a tool they needed to be successful in their work.

During the analysis of participants' interviews, the theme of relationships emerged. Cavendish and Connor (2018), Fish (2008), and Park (2008), all reported that stakeholder involvement in the IEP process was an area of needed improvement as educators strive to close the gap between the intent of IDEA and educator practice. Participants believed that intentionally developing relationships with students and parents was their duty and was a necessity for their work. When speaking about building relationships, Elliot said, "You have to build that relationship because in a classroom setting I'm going to have to be critical of you." He believed students fell along a continuum in terms of how much teacher involvement they needed in their lives and that their location on the continuum was usually dependent on the level of outside-of-school support they received. Kurt believed a student's well-being should always come before instruction and it was imperative for the teacher to attempt to understand the student's perspective when solving problems. Kurt's belief was supported by Ryan and Deci's (2000) finding that teachers who used a directorial approach were more likely to have students who disengaged and lost interest in the classroom. John believed teachers would either have a positive or negative impact on students and they should nurture students by finding the uniqueness within each individual. Ralph agreed with John and Kurt and thought teachers had a responsibility to understand the peripheral challenges students face each day and support them with those challenges.

In the theme Motivation, participants discussed external forces that could impact their students' belief that they could succeed as well as who students held responsible for their success. Ryan and Deci (2000) identified three human needs that must be met to develop self-determination which were relatedness, competence, and autonomy.

Participants discussed competence through the lens of success and adversity during interviews. Kurt thought teachers needed to make sure students did not “feel dumb” as a result of their instructional experience. He spoke about paying attention to students and assisting them in finding their individual path to success. He also acknowledged giving students such individualized attention took more time, but it was worth it if he could help his students through adversity to experience success. John exemplified the idea of individualization by describing how to give students of varying performance levels assignments that were challenging, but also would be achievable by the students. Elliot wanted all of his students with special needs to realize they were capable and could achieve just as well as other students. He shared his belief about how important it was for students to get feedback from their teacher on things they do well just like the things upon which they need to improve.

Competence refers to the need for individuals to feel they can effectively navigate their environment and must be present in each individual to facilitate intrinsic motivation (Yu, et al. 2018). Ralph shared an anecdote about a student who received an award during her time in school and how she was brought to tears when she was presented with the award. He perceived the student had developed the feeling of competence by overcoming adversity to achieve her goals. He used this story as an example of the balance between adversity and success that students must experience during their academic careers. Kate spoke of the frustration caused when students did not have the feeling of competence and how this made it more difficult to provide instruction to those students. She described students who came from families which did not have success with their educational endeavors and how they were less likely to work through the adversity of the course

content. She thought the students would say the content would not be useful to them “because they didn't want to face the reality that they didn't know how to do it” when their peers did. She shared that she overcame this challenge by rewarding students with stickers on the student work.

Hamdi (2018) wrote that extrinsic motivation occurs when behavior was demonstrated to be the result of external factors such as rewards or praise. Ryan and Deci (2000) contended extrinsically motivated behaviors were the least autonomous, however, Kate found that rewards were useful in getting students to perform in that particular situation. Participants thought students must take some responsibility for their learning. Kurt believed that approximately half of the families he worked with shared that belief. The educators interviewed for this study believed they should discuss the responsibilities of teachers and students openly with all stakeholders when they met to develop IEPs or to discuss student progress. Elliot recalled his own experience as a student and said he believed that it was an “indictment” of him more than anyone else when he did not perform as a student. Corey thought students who were more engaged with their IEP process were more likely to have a better work ethic. Cavendish (2013) stated involving students in decisions concerning their educational outcomes increased their achievement and positive school outcomes. John believed students who were more involved with the development of their IEP were more likely to experience post-secondary success. Ryan and Deci’s findings explained (2000) how students must perceive their actions to be self-directed to nurture intrinsic motivation, which aligned with the belief that it was beneficial for students to be engaged in the development of their IEP.

Yu, et al. (2018) wrote how autonomy could be described as an individual’s need

to organize internally their personal experiences and use them to regulate their behavior. Autonomy could be applied to participants sharing their experiences regarding intervention and differentiation. In the theme, Positive Practices, Ralph discussed how flexibility should be afforded to students with disabilities. He believed teachers should attempt to identify challenges early so they could help students find a path to success. Kurt and John both discussed creating different assessments as well as different formats for students which were not less rigorous but written in such a way that their students were better able to demonstrate their knowledge.

Participants also believed practices that led to consistency and predictable environments for students helped facilitate success. Elliot offered the example of the master schedule as an area offering consistency for students and staff at the school. He compared the master schedule implemented at the research site with prior experiences and found it helpful that students went to the same classes at the same times every day. He and John also discussed how consistency in staffing was something they perceived as a factor leading to improved outcomes for students. John compared the research site where staff was very stable from year to year with a previous experience of a “revolving door” of staff. He remembered being frustrated by the inconsistency in staffing because it made it difficult to pursue the mission and vision of the school. Staffing consistency was similar to the concept of relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The latter authors argued it was a contributing factor to intrinsic motivation. Yu, et al. (2018) described relatedness as the need to feel connected to others in a meaningful way, which could explain why participants believed they were more effective when staffing was stable as opposed to changing frequently.

Preparation was also discussed by participants as helpful in their practice as educators. Ralph described the practice of making sure everyone engaged in the IEP meeting had a specific role and was aware of what they needed to be prepared to explain during the meeting. Corey spoke about collaborating with her colleagues to prepare for instructional delivery which could also be connected to Yu, et al.'s (2018) concept of relatedness. She gave an example of a new teacher induction program she participated in as a new teacher and how beneficial it was to have dedicated time with her colleagues. She thought collaboration was especially important for special education teachers as they were often assigned to teach in teams.

The participants of this study were all veteran educators who were confident in their abilities to meet the needs of their students. They described several practices they believed were beneficial in meeting the needs of students with disabilities and in some cases contrasted those practices with less effective practices they had experienced previously. The strategies and practices identified to answer RQ2 were largely driven by teachers and administrators at the local school level. RQ3 addressed policies that impact graduation which were not as easily influenced by individual teachers.

RQ3: What policies do identified special education teachers perceive are impacting special education student graduation rates at a public high school in Northeast Georgia with a lower graduation rate for special education students compared to non-disabled classmates?

The participants of this study perceived policies impacting the graduation rate of students with disabilities as systemic and beyond their control. In the theme Challenges, participants discussed policies they wished could be changed to create a better path to

success for students with disabilities. One of the policies participants discussed was school evaluation. The educators interviewed for this study expressed frustration regarding how their school was evaluated based on their students graduating in four years. Elliot shared that he had once written a lawmaker to describe what students and teachers are dealing with in schools. He said he wrote to ask the lawmaker if schools could get credit if they received students from troubled backgrounds and still got them to graduation. He thought some students had to be extensively supported to facilitate their success and sometimes it might take them longer than four years to earn their diploma. In those cases, Elliot believed the culture created around graduating in four years was discouraging to some students. Kurt agreed and said graduation was “a very narrow pathway” and did not lead to preparing all students for what they wanted to do post-graduation. He wished more accommodations could be made to help students reach graduation in different ways. Kurt thought, “the state does education a disservice by counting a kid with an IEP a drop out if they don’t graduate in four years.” Ralph agreed regarding graduation and said that none of the parents he worked with ever wanted to hear how it might take five years for their student to graduate. He believed that teachers and families should implement a realistic plan for each student even if it could take longer for a student to earn a diploma. Corey implied the method of evaluating the school has created a culture that says if you do not earn a diploma for years, you have failed, but that mentality was a detriment to the student. The participants said the burden of getting everything completed in four years was simply unrealistic for some students and caused some of them to drop out when they could have completed the requirements in a longer period of time with a reduced course load.

The educators also discussed the lack of options afforded to students to reach their personal goals concerning post-secondary life. Kate wished that students could have graduation requirements more closely aligned to the field of work students wished to pursue after high school. She believed they should be able to decide whether or not they wanted to go to college or do something else and their graduation requirements should be tailored towards those goals. John echoed Kate's sentiment by expressing his belief that students need different outlets to demonstrate success depending on who they were and schools should offer more "hands-on" opportunities for students to apply course content to vocational settings. Yu, et al.'s (2018) findings, as well as Ryan and Deci's (2000) concept of autonomy, supported the notion that students might remain more engaged in school if they were given more opportunities to choose between graduation requirements best fitting their post-secondary goals. Elliot shared his belief that schools should take advantage of extra-curricular opportunities to create an outlet for students to participate in more learning opportunities at school. He thought students might be more engaged in school if there were more opportunities for them to interact in areas of interest through school, but outside of the school day. Ralph believed the lack of options offered at the time of this study would result in some of his students dropping out of school before earning a high school diploma. All of the participants appreciated the desire for every student to be qualified to attend a four-year university upon high school graduation, but they thought students should have more control over their path to earning a diploma.

The educators interviewed for this study also shared that they had a lot of responsibilities beyond delivering instruction, making it difficult to focus solely on teaching and ensuring that their students were earning credits toward graduation.

Participants expressed their belief that IDEA was instrumental in serving their students by requiring the development of the IEP. While the IEP was perceived as extremely beneficial, it also created a burden of annually assessing students' current levels of performance, strengths, weaknesses, goals, and special services that the students would receive in school, a duty which fell to the special education teachers.

Participants voiced the need for additional human resources to maximize the intent of the IEP process. Kurt described special education teachers as being "spread too thin" when discussing all of his responsibilities that fall outside of the realm of day-to-day instruction. He believed that special education teachers should be responsible for planning, teaching, and grading in the same manner as their general education counterparts, and additional staff should be hired to work with teachers to keep track of the documentation process. Ralph believed the responsibility of special educators was so overwhelming, it was inevitable that they would be out of compliance with IDEA at some point in their career. He believed that the IEP kept everyone on track and should be done correctly, but the most important difference was made by teachers working directly with students.

Elliot said it was common to have classrooms consisting of over 30 students with approximately half of them having a documented disability. He explained how difficult such a situation was to teach in and how not having time to plan with the other educator in the room could further exacerbate the difficulty they experienced. All of the participants thought they would benefit from having additional support to develop the IEP, which could help them to focus their energy on implementation and preparation with their colleagues.

Limitations

Qualitative research methods were used in this study to gain a deep understanding of a specific case (Stake, 1995). All studies have strengths and weaknesses and researchers should acknowledge the weaknesses of their design (Creswell, 2014). The limitations of this study include the potential bias of the researcher, an analysis of only one school, and small sample size. In the following section, the researcher discusses the limitations of this study in detail and what was done to minimize those limitations.

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument of data analysis and could have biases that might impact the study (Merriam, 2002). The researcher was a veteran educator who taught special education in Georgia public high schools, therefore he brought his own opinions and perspectives concerning the factors influencing high school graduation rates for students with learning disabilities. Researchers have a responsibility to describe accurately the meaning of what is being studied as stated by the participants and not their own views (Ary et al., 2014). Researcher bias could have impacted several aspects of the study including participant selection, data collection, and data interpretation.

The first limitation was the participants for the study were purposefully recruited based upon criteria believed by the researcher to provide rich data to answer the research questions such as the eligibility status of the students they taught and their years of teaching experience (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Maxwell, 2013). Six teachers participated in this study who taught special education and had at least two years of teaching experience at the school site; they had at least 5 years of teaching experience in their career. The participants had their unique perceptions influencing the meanings

which they assigned to their experiences. The researcher did not conduct interviews with students which limited the interpretation of the students' experience to the perspective of the educator participants in the study.

The second limitation was how researcher bias could have potentially affected the data collection process. The researcher used Seidman's (2013) in-depth three interview approach, and adapted it for this study. The purpose of the interviews was to have the participants reconstruct their experiences in their own words, which required the researcher to ask direct open-ended questions. The questions used in the interviews were follow-up questions based on what the participants shared as they reconstructed their experiences (Seidman, 2013), therefore the participants were not all asked the same questions. The interviews were framed around the same topics so the researcher could identify emerging patterns in the participants' experiences. Interview questions were intentionally open-ended to guard against researcher influence; this allowed participants to have a great deal of control over what data was collected.

The third limitation was the potential impact researcher bias could have had on data analysis. The researcher had experience as a teacher of students with disabilities as well as a school-based administrator who served special education teachers, students, and parents. As an educator with experience in working with special education students and teachers, the researcher was careful not to replace the meaning of experiences assigned by the participants with his own interpretations. He identified his potential biases before conducting the study and also identified what he thought the results would be before the study began. This allowed him to consciously address his own biases throughout the data collection and analysis process. To ensure the reliability of the data collection and

analysis the researcher conducted member checks (Ary et al., 2014; Seidman, 2013). The researcher recorded and transcribed interviews with participants. He also wrote memos capturing insights directly after interviews took place and used those tools to confirm the researcher's interpretation of the meaning that participants assigned to their experiences (Maxwell, 2013).

A fourth limitation was the small sample size of the participants in the study. There were only six participants included in this study which made it difficult to generalize the results. Maxwell (2013) discussed the differences in external generalizability and internal generalizability. External generalizability is the ability to generalize the results beyond the case studied while internal generalizability is the ability to generalize the results of the study to the case as a whole. The generalizing process for this study began with the selection of the case similar to other settings. The site was selected based on the school rating on the CCRPI. The researcher studied one school in Northeast Georgia with a unique community and a unique set of resources. Findings from this study may not be readily transferable to every school setting. School leaders serving at schools with similar demographics might consider whether the findings of this study could apply to their schools. Participants selected for this case were studied in a specific context. The results were not intended to be generalized externally which is why purposeful selection (Maxwell, 2013) was more appropriate than purposeful random sampling (Patton, 2015). If a reader of this study processes what was learned from the analysis of the rich descriptions provided by the participants and reflects on how the knowledge gained from that analysis could be applied to other instances, then internal generalization could occur (Merriam, 2002).

Another limitation was the verifiability of the findings from the study. The researcher was the primary tool for data analysis during this study and he was not able to objectively verify the results of the study against the data collected from the participants. To ensure the credibility of the study, the researcher collected rich data, used triangulation, and validated data interpretation with participants over the course of several months. The researcher compared the interview data, documents, and field notes in search of agreement or the lack thereof to reduce the risk of associations caused by researcher bias during data analysis. Triangulating different methods of data collection and sources corroborated the data analysis which enhanced the validity and trustworthiness of the study (Miles, et al., 2020; Stake, 1995).

The researcher provided a rich and detailed description of participant perspectives presenting the knowledge gained from this study and how it could be applied to a similar case (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013). The analysis may be useful to educators along with policymakers to better understand how to help students overcome the barriers believed to hinder IDEA students from graduating.

Implications

The researcher found special education teachers view IDEA and the IEP process as beneficial tools facilitating the success of students with disabilities. There were also practices and policies participants identified which could either hinder or enhance the effects of IDEA and the IEP on student success. Five themes emerged from a thorough analysis of data. Those themes are the IEP, Relationships, Motivation, Positive Practices, and Challenges which were the basis of the implications from this study. The findings may be useful for educational stakeholders such as teachers, administrators, legislators,

policymakers, and parents.

Since the enactment of IDEA, more students with disabilities have been included in the general education setting which has led to better outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Once a student was determined to be eligible to receive special education services under IDEA, the school was required to develop an IEP for that student (Hurder, 2014). The participants in this study agreed that the IEP was an essential document helping to frame the educational services the school needed to implement in order for the students to be included to the greatest extent possible in the general education setting. The IEP was a document consisting of the student's current level of performance, strengths, weaknesses, goals, and special services the student would receive in school (Hurder, 2014). While the IEP has resulted in an increased graduation rate and improved outcomes for special education students, there is still a significant gap in the graduation rate of students with disabilities and their general education counterparts. Researchers should study what else could be done to enhance the impact of IDEA and the effectiveness of the IEP.

More time and resources should be dedicated to the professional development of general education teachers who serve special education students. Participants discussed the challenges they sometimes faced as a result of their peers not understanding how best to serve students with disabilities and how to scaffold their supports in such a way that students were instructed with the appropriate amount of rigor. Elliot mentioned that sometimes teachers and parents "get lost in what the IEP is" and what purpose it serves. General education teachers' reluctance to serve special education students has continued into recent years and could be exacerbated by the lack of training available to general

education teachers on inclusive education (Hettiaarachi et al., 2018). Participants discussed how important it was to create individualized paths to success which were enhanced by differentiating instruction as well as assessment for students. Differentiation could be an area of consideration when developing a professional learning curriculum.

Another implication derived from this research is how educators need to be intentional in developing relationships with stakeholders. In the theme Relationships, all of the participants believed strongly that building relationships with stakeholders served them well in their practice. Relatedness is a contributing factor for intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Feelings of competence and autonomy facilitate intrinsic motivation and their effects could be intensified by feelings of relatedness or belonging to a community, group, or team (Ryan & Deci, 2000). John gave an example from when he was in school, of one of his former teachers building a relationship with him and discussed how when that happened everything “just clicked” and he became more serious about school. Corey shared the main reason why students were successful at her school was because of relationships. Ryan and Deci’s research highlighted (2000) how infants’ curiosity and willingness to explore were intensified when infants were close to their mothers. The same feelings of security that infants experience when near their mother could be present in the context of interpersonal relationships individuals could experience at school and could help to facilitate intrinsic motivation.

Strategies which increased consistency could facilitate success for students at school. Participants believed that consistency led to predictability, which facilitated student success. Students and teachers both benefit from knowing what to expect in order to plan for challenges throughout the day. Participants gave examples of the master

schedule, staff retention, and preparation to create consistency within the school.

Individuals must feel competent to nurture intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The IEP creates consistency by framing the student's strengths, weaknesses, and services for all stakeholders and students would be served well to have the IEP enhanced by being implemented in a predictable environment.

The researcher also found that stakeholders should look for opportunities to provide choices to students concerning their educational experience. Yu, et al.'s findings (2018) described autonomy as one's need to organize internally one's personal experiences and use them to regulate his or her behavior. Ryan and Deci's results (2000) stated that individuals must perceive that their actions were self-directed to cultivate intrinsic motivation. Participants in this study believed that students should have more choices about their pathway to high school graduation and how they prepared for post-secondary life. One example of this sentiment was given by Kate who said, "I think options gives us the flexibility for them to be successful in different settings." Ralph remembered a time when different diploma types were offered to students and recalled that students were more engaged in school then. Elliot saw an opportunity to expand extra-curricular opportunities for students to provide more choice. If students were given more opportunity to be autonomous with educational decision-making, they might be more engaged and take more ownership for earning a high school diploma.

The educators interviewed for this study expressed frustration from "being spread too thin" as they fulfilled their responsibilities as special education teachers. They were clear regarding their belief that IDEA and the IEP were essential for their students to be successful, but also pointed out the desire to have additional resources to fulfill those

responsibilities as well as others, so they could have time to focus on the instruction of their students while implementing an individualized plan for each student. The participants in this study were charged with coordinating resources and writing IEPs for their students which included current levels of performance, strengths, weaknesses, goals, and special services that the student would receive in school (Hurder, 2014). To do this required collaboration with regular education teachers, special education teachers, parents, and an administrator or someone representing the local education agency or school (Hurder, 2014). When compared to their general education counterparts, participants thought this workload was unbalanced and they believed they could be more effective if their responsibilities were commensurate with that of their general education colleagues. According to Ryan and Deci's conclusions (2000), if teachers' feelings of competence were negatively impacted by their workload, it could impact their feelings of self-efficacy at work.

Another implication of this study was how educators could believe utilizing graduation rates as an evaluation measure did not capture the quality of education provided at their school. Participants thought educators, as well as students, should be honored for earning a diploma and demonstrating the determination to do so especially when it was difficult to do so. The study participants shared their belief that evaluating schools in this manner could be demoralizing for teachers as well as students. When analyzed through the lens of competence, which was described in Ryan and Deci's study (2000), this measure could have a negative impact on teacher and student efficacy if the evaluation measure did not accurately capture the success experienced at the school.

IDEA has been an influential law for improving the outcomes of students with

disabilities. The IEP is a requirement of the law that educators found extremely beneficial in supporting their students, however, other factors emerged during the study which participants perceived either hindered or enhanced the effect of IDEA and the IEP on student success. The findings and implications of this study may be useful to educational stakeholders such as teachers, administrators, legislators, policymakers, and parents as they continue to seek improvement and close the gap between special education students and their general education counterparts.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the researcher's assessment of findings, limitations, and a review of literature for this study, the following recommendations are put forth to be considered for future studies. The first recommendation would be to increase the sample size of the study. The participants were very forthcoming in their thoughts and feelings regarding the impact of IDEA on their practice. The findings of this study could be verified by conducting a similar study and including more participants (Maxwell, 2014).

The second recommendation would be to study a site with different demographic makeup. The selected site was comprised of grades 9-12 and over 80% of the student population was white. The student population was approximately 17% economically disadvantaged with roughly 10% of the students identified as being eligible for special education services. Researchers may consider studying a middle school setting or a different socioeconomic group to broaden the understanding of the impact of IDEA on different populations.

The third recommendation for future research would be a study focused on understanding the impact of practices and policies on special education teacher efficacy.

Participants in this study often shared they were overwhelmed and they were being asked to complete an impossible task. A study focusing on the responsibilities of special education teachers and the impact that those responsibilities on teacher efficacy could inform human resources staff as well as those charged with funding human resources in public education.

The fourth recommendation would be a longitudinal study focused on the matriculation of a group of special education students through high school and during their post-secondary life. Participants of this study thought they had a responsibility to facilitate success for their students beyond high school. A study including students' post-secondary outcomes could be beneficial in informing educators of the impact that the policies and practices of their school have on post-secondary outcomes.

A fifth recommendation would be a study focusing on the perception parents have about the policies and practices impacting IDEA graduation rates. This study focused on the perceptions of teachers of IDEA students. The findings of this study could be built upon with a study seeking to understand parents' perceptions regarding IDEA graduation.

The sixth recommendation for future research would be a study focused on implementing IDEA in a digital environment. IDEA was first implemented in 1975 (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Since that time the digital tools used in educational settings have evolved greatly and students and teachers have more access to technological resources than ever before. Students are participating in virtual schools and IDEA should be studied further in the context of a virtual environment.

Conclusions

Special education students graduate at rates significantly lower than their general education counterparts, despite federal legislative intervention. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that special education students graduated at a rate of 67.1 percent in 2017, while general education students graduated at a rate of 84.6 percent for the same year (Digest of Education Statistics, 2019). Public schools in America have been implementing IDEA for over 40 years and after the expenditure of great effort, time, and financial resources students with disabilities are still graduating at a rate significantly lower than their classmates. The researcher for this qualitative study investigated the educational experiences of teachers of IDEA students at a public high school in Northeast Georgia with a significantly lower graduation rate for IDEA students compared to non-disabled classmates to determine the barriers impacting IDEA graduation rates. He collected and analyzed data on six participants who taught special education students in a public high school in North East Georgia.

From the results of this study, the researcher concluded that there were several factors that impacted high school graduation for special education students. These factors were consistency, preparation, individualization, evaluation, choice, and human resources. The review of literature along with the results of this study framed how the researcher reached these conclusions.

The basis for this study began with an interest in SDT and how it could explain student behavior (Deci et al.,1994; Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT (Deci et al.,1994; Ryan & Deci, 2000) was used to understand how school personnel interpreted school policies and practices that impact high school graduation for students with learning disabilities. For

students to have deep learning experiences, they must be motivated by personal growth (Lee & Turner, 2017). SDT has a focus on autonomy, relatedness, and competence and specifies that all three must be present to help facilitate intrinsic motivation (Yu, et al., 2018). Yu, et al. (2018) stated autonomy described one's needs to organize internally their personal experiences and use them to regulate his or her behavior. Competence referred to the need to feel like one can effectively navigate his or her environment (Yu, et al., 2018). According to the findings of Ryan and Deci (2000), individuals must feel competent and must perceive that their actions are self-directed to nurture intrinsic motivation.

Students who have been found eligible for special education and receive services under the specific learning disability category have been impacted by IDEA. They have had different rights afforded to them relative to their non-disabled peers including an IEP which is a guide for how a special education student should be educated throughout the student's time in public school. The presence of a disability, IDEA, and IEPs impacted the student experience, all of which were interpreted using SDT (Deci et al., 1994; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Before conducting this study, the researcher assumed the findings would suggest IDEA reaches further than legislators ever intended. At its core, IDEA was meant to ensure that students with disabilities were included in the school setting (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The participants in this study were selected because they serve students under SLD eligibility. Their students would have likely been included in school before the implementation of IDEA. The researcher assumed the participants would have believed IDEA places too much responsibility on teachers and not enough on students.

The findings did not align with the researcher's assumptions because participants believed their jobs would be more difficult without the framework of services provided to their students under IDEA. The educators interviewed in this study shared that they would like to see more resources dedicated to the implementation of IDEA. They wanted to spend more time on instructional responsibilities and get more support to assist them in staying compliant with IDEA. They believed the requirements of IDEA were necessary, however, they were overwhelmed at times with all of the responsibilities the law created for special education teachers.

Special education teachers' perceptions of IDEA and the IEP process were positive as they related to how they benefitted their students and their practice. The participants did not feel they could complete their duties effectively without the tools afforded to them under IDEA. They also believed teachers and schools should put additional practices and policies in place that could enhance the impact of IDEA legislation to facilitate the success of special education teachers and students as they pursue high school diplomas. The educators interviewed for this study thought they were undervalued at times due to the balance of workload with the resources available to complete their duties. They were passionate about serving their students but also believed additional resources were needed to realize their goals as special educators.

IDEA was initially passed in 1975 (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Public education today has evolved since the passage of the federal education law and educators have continued to learn how to apply the law in a rapidly changing environment. Many students participate in virtual instruction full-time or some combination of in-person and virtual instruction. Public school staff stakeholders have grappled with a response to a

global pandemic that meets the needs of their students. IDEA can provide a framework for a path to success, but educators must learn how to apply the federal legislation in a setting that is continually evolving. A deeper understanding of human behavior could better equip educators, policymakers, and parents to be more agile in applying the intent of IDEA in an ever-changing world.

IDEA was a legislative victory for students with disabilities; the law led to improved learning and graduation outcomes. The next step in closing the gap in graduation rates for students with disabilities relative to their general education counterparts may be employing additional resources. Such resources could allow educators to create school environments that could encourage autonomy and relatedness, resulting in feelings of competence. This could facilitate more student ownership in the educational process and allow students to enter post-secondary life more prepared and engaged in their career goals.

The researcher found disagreement with his initial assumptions. IDEA is perceived as support for teachers in enhancing the factors that lead to high school graduation for special education students. Educators and policy makers should consider how to build upon IDEA by developing mechanisms that increase or facilitated consistency, preparation, individualization, evaluation, choice, and human resources in schools.

Researcher's Final Memo

Designing and implementing a research study was enlightening as a student and as a practitioner. As a student and novice researcher, I had to learn how to conduct a study so it would be credible and trustworthy. Through this experience, I have learned how

important the design of the study is to myself as the researcher as well as anyone who reads the findings. I was able to trust the findings of this study because I had a plan to address ethical concerns and validity. Clearly stating the limitations of the study also provided context for the interpretation of the results and informed recommendations for future research. Throughout the execution of the study my perspective on leadership and special education has evolved and caused me to question what I believe about public education.

As a district leader in public education, it is sometimes easy to become disconnected from the practices and challenges of classroom teachers. As leaders, we must seek to understand the challenges faced by teachers and students. We should then empower our teachers to implement needed changes to support the success of our students. Through listening to the participants during the data collection period of this study, I realized how narrow my perspective was of the challenges they faced in our schools and the potential solutions. I thought participants would tell me they believed that IDEA was hindering the ability of their students to become autonomous by placing the responsibility of student success solely on the school rather than the student. What I learned was that teachers rely heavily on the framework provided by IDEA and wished they had more resources to dedicate to its implementation. I also learned that the evaluation methods utilized by districts and departments of education could have unintended consequences impacting teachers' morale and feelings of competence. As we continue to seek out measures to improve public education, it is vital that we seek to understand the experiences of all stakeholders, from the front-line staff who work directly with students, to state and federal legislators who are responsible for crafting the bills that

will shape the future of public education.

I initially thought the participants in this study would resent the responsibilities created by the implementation of IDEA. What I learned was the participants were grateful for them instead. They wished they had additional resources available to them so they could focus more energy on realizing the intent of IDEA. As educators and policymakers continue to look for ways to close the gap in graduation rates, it is imperative the perspectives of parents, teachers, students, and other stakeholders who work directly with students are understood. Listening to the participants in this study and trying to make meaning of their experiences changed my perspective as a veteran educator and it could have the same effect on those who are further removed from the challenges faced by front-line educational stakeholders.

Educators need to look for ways to increase competence autonomy and relatedness in our schools. IDEA helped educators by providing a roadmap to collaboration between stakeholders to meet the needs of special education students. What I have learned through completing this study is that my experience and perspective were only part of the investigation. By understanding the experience of other professionals my understanding and perspective of special education changed. This study was done at one school inside of one community. The data collected gave deep and rich descriptions and furthered my understanding of the case. Every community is unique and we must continue to ask better questions, challenge our assumptions, and explicitly identify our biases to make meaning of our lived experiences so that we can advance our educational goals.

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APPENDIX A:
Field Note Summary

APPENDIX A

FIELD NOTE SUMMARY

Note Type:

Classroom: _____

Date: _____

Visit: _____

Interview: _____

Document: _____

1. What were the main issues or themes that struck you in this contact?
2. Summarize the information you failed to get from this contact.
3. What struck you as salient or interesting during this contact?
4. What new or remaining questions do you have in considering your next contact?

APPENDIX B:
Interview Protocol

APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview 1: Life History

1. Describe your experience as an elementary school student.
2. Describe your experience as a high school student?
3. Describe your experience as a college student?

Interview 2: Professional Experience

1. Describe your career experience.
2. Why did you want to become an educator?
3. Describe your most rewarding professional experience?
4. Describe one of your most difficult professional experiences?

Interview 3: Current Professional Practice

1. Describe a perfect school.
2. What qualities must an effective educator possess?
3. Tell me about a time when you were frustrated at work.
4. Tell me about a time when you felt you were able to successfully meet the needs of a student.

APPENDIX C:
Institutional Review Board Approval/Exemption

APPENDIX C
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL/EXEMPTION



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

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 03937-2019 Responsible Researcher: Dallas LeDuff

Supervising Faculty: Dr. William Truby

Project Title: *Special Education Student Experience: A Case Study of a Georgia High School.*

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is Exempt from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under Exemption Category 2. Your research study may begin immediately. If the nature of the research project changes such that exemption criteria may no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *Upon completion of this research study all data (data list, email correspondence, transcripts, etc.) must be securely maintained (locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a minimum of 3 years.*
- *Participant names and the corresponding pseudonym list must be kept in separate files.*
- *Research statement must be read aloud to each participant at the start of each recorded interview session.*
- *Recordings must be deleted immediately upon creating the transcript. Exempt protocol guidelines prohibit the collection and/or storage of recordings.*

If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at irb@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.

Elizabeth Ann Olphie 10.16.2019
Elizabeth Ann Olphie, IRB Administrator

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.
Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-253-2947.

APPENDIX D:
CITI Program Certificate

APPENDIX D
CITI PROGRAM CERTIFICATE



Completion Date 11-Oct-2019
Expiration Date 10-Oct-2022
Record ID 23984135

This is to certify that:

Dallas LeDuff

Has completed the following Citi Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.

Human Research
(Curriculum Group)
IRB Basic
(Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Valdosta State University



Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?wceb7f163-52e1-442c-9c97-fe119d5f35b5-23984135