A Phenomenological Study of the Resiliency of Special Education Teachers

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A Phenomenological Study of the Resiliency of Special Education Teachers

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my grandparents Sandra Jo and Maurice Don Parenteau who I wish were here to see my accomplishments, my parents Guy and Ramona Cunningham, my wife Bethany, and my three amazing children, Savannah, Gavin, and Avery. As the first in my family to graduate college, I dedicate this to my grandchildren, and future generations of family that I pray aspire to pursue their education and fulfill all of their dreams.
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Abstract

A Phenomenological Study of the Resiliency of Special Education Teachers

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Drexel University, February 2015

Chairperson: Kathy D. Geller

Nationally, there is a special education teacher shortage creating a lack of qualified special education teachers and threatening the quality of education special education students receive. To understand what compels qualified special education teachers to stay in the profession, this study analyzed the lived experience of those who have stayed for 10 or more years in a single district.

Prior research has largely followed a deficit model that explained cause and effect relationships between why teachers leave the field and the factors that led them to that decision. This study sought to understand what compels them to stay.

The following research questions guided this study: (a) What is the nature or essence of the experience of teaching special education for many years? (b) How do special education teachers describe what compels them to stay in the special education classroom? (c) How do long-tenured special education teachers understand and perceive the nature of their resiliency? The three guiding questions were explored through in-depth semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and researcher observations and field notes.

Nineteen participants, all special education teachers in the Twin Rivers Unified School District, participated in this study. Twelve teachers were interviewed. The interviews were analyzed to gain thick, rich, descriptive insights into their lived experiences of teaching special education for many years. Along with the 12 interviews, a focus group with seven participants was conducted. Five thematic findings emerged from In Vivo Coding: (a) personal characteristics beyond demographics influence teacher resiliency, (b) an ethic of care toward special education students supports resiliency, (c) positive and supportive relationships with professional peers support resiliency, (d) negative challenges build resilience and influence a teacher’s desire to stay committed to the profession and the district, and (e) tenure influences a teacher’s decision to stay.

Given the findings of this study, the following four recommendations are offered to K-12 administration as they seek to build support and acquire resources for their special education teachers: (a) develop and maintain a special education mentorship program, (b) provide professional development in special education, (c) personally support and maintain a relationship with your special education teachers, and (d) develop a rewards program to acknowledge special education teacher accomplishments.
Key terms: special education, teacher retention, teacher attrition, teacher resiliency, administrative support, teacher mentors, special education professional development
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Research

Education administrators are continually searching for ways to better improve the retention of highly qualified special education teachers. In an era of special education teacher shortages, there is a vast amount of literature on why special education teachers leave the field, but little qualitative inquiry has been done to understand why they stay. To understand the phenomenon of teacher resiliency, this study used a phenomenological approach to hear the voices of long-tenured special education teachers who chose to stay in the special education classroom of a single district. Data of resilient special education teachers’ lived experiences, perceptions, and understanding were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and a researchers journal. The research was conducted within the Twin Rivers Unified School District, one of the larger districts in California that serves parts of North Sacramento, Del Paso Heights, Rio Linda, Foothill Farms, and North Highlands.

Introduction to the Problem

“Enacted in 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandated the provision of a free and appropriate public school education for children and youth ages 3–21 who have disabilities” (Aud et al., 2011, p. 32). Since then, children with disabilities have received instruction from credentialed special education teachers. However since Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act’s (IDEA) enactment, the recruitment and retention of qualified special education teachers has been a challenge for school districts. Prior research found that the areas most impacted by high special education teacher turnover are low socio-economic school districts.
Billingsley (2005) identified that from 1995 to 2005, the population of students with disabilities grew at a rate three times faster than that of the general education population. Facing a shortage of credentialed special education teachers, districts have, in some instances, filled positions with unqualified teachers who have not received the appropriate training to meet the many and varied needs of these students.

According to the American Association for Employment in Education (2003), “in spite of decades-long shortages in the special education fields, No Child Left Behind and ‘Highly Qualified Teacher’ requirements have become more demanding” (p. 8). Keigher (2010) noted that among special education teachers, annually 9.8% were movers and 12.3% left the field altogether. This is the highest percentage of attrition from any main assignment field in K-12 education (Keigher, 2010).

Further, special education teachers have been required to comply with the requirements of the IDEA Act, making the responsibilities of the job even more complex (IDEA, 2004; P.L. 108-446). Kozleski, Mainzer, and Deshler (2000) found that the major problems faced by special educators included the following: high caseloads, excessive paperwork, inadequate planning time, inadequate leadership support, teacher isolation, insufficient focus on student learning, and a lack of instructional and technological resources. Billingsley (2003) in turn has suggested that these factors negatively affected special education teacher “job satisfaction, commitment, stress, and career decisions” (p. 8).

Billingsley (2003) suggested that among the reasons qualified special education teachers are leaving the field is the challenges and pressures special education teachers face. As qualified teachers leave the special education field, the quality of education
students with disabilities receive is jeopardized, as classes must be filled with less experienced and sometimes unqualified teachers. “Attrition plays a part in the teacher shortage problem, and efforts to improve retention must be informed by an understanding of the factors that contribute to attrition” (Billingsley, 2003, p. 4). Billingsley found that the major factors that led to high attrition rates in special education related to the following themes: “(1) teacher characteristics, (2) personal factors, (3) teacher qualifications, (4) work environments, and (5) teachers’ affective reactions to work” (p. 4).

**Statement of the Problem to be Researched**

While teacher attrition has been studied extensively, little is known about the phenomenon of resiliency for special education teachers who stay.

**Purpose and Significance of the Problem**

This study sought to understand the complexities of the phenomenon of resiliency in special education teachers who remain in the teaching role for extended periods. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the phenomenon of resilience through the shared lived experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of long-tenured (10 or more years) special education teachers in the Twin Rivers Unified School District (TRUSD).

Most studies on special education teachers have both studied their attrition and have been largely quantitative in nature, focusing on measuring what is missing or problematic in the teachers’ experiences. Little qualitative inquiry has focused on the phenomenon of the special educators’ resilience and its role in their choice to stay in the
profession. Hence, the voices of long-tenured special education teachers describing what compels them to remain in the classroom are largely missing from the research.

Prior research has primarily followed a deficit model that explains cause and effect relationships between why teachers leave the field and the factors that led them to that decision. It was the goal of this research to conduct an exploration of the phenomenon of resiliency that instead looked at the lived experiences of long-tenured special education teachers and sought to understand what compelled them to stay. In her 2003 research, Billingsley recommended, “future studies should address teachers’ perspectives, observations of their work lives, and analyses of journals and other documents to provide a full understanding of important contributors to job satisfaction, commitment, stress, and career decisions” (p. 32). Billingsley further noted that “an in-depth analysis of stayers would provide a better understanding of resilience and why some teachers are able to stay in a certain position for many years” (p. 34). This research sought to respond to her recommendation by pursuing a deep inquiry into the lives of resilient teachers who appeared to have overcome the challenges of working in the special education classroom. In examining the lived experiences of stayers in the TRUSD with 10 or more years of experience, this study provides findings, conclusions, and recommendations that may help administrators in this district and perhaps others better understand the role resilience plays in a teacher’s decision to remain in the classroom.
Research Questions

The following are the research questions this study addressed:

1. What is the nature or essence of the experience of teaching special education for many years?
2. How do special education teachers describe what compels them to stay in the special education classroom?
3. How do long-tenured special education teachers understand and perceive the nature of their resiliency?
Conceptual Framework

Researcher’s Stance

This researcher believes that looking at the views, perceptions, and experiences of individuals in a particular setting best develops meaning and understanding. This study is based on social constructivism, as it draws from the expressed views of special education teachers who have shown resilience and taught more than 10 years in the TRUSD and its previous districts that were part of a recent multi-district consolidation. Social constructivism was recognized by this researcher as the most effective framework.
and was carefully considered when choosing to do semi-structured face-to-face interviews. This researcher believes that by gathering multiple descriptions of the lived experiences of individuals, a better picture of their situation may be developed in a collective that can be shared with others. Gergen (1985) shared that a social constructionist inquiry “is principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live” (p. 266). Using social constructivism as a worldview, this researcher hopes that the findings and conclusions of this study will expand knowledge on the subject of special education teacher resiliency and fill a gap in qualitative inquiry.

It is through this social constructivist and pragmatist perspective that this phenomenological study approach was undertaken. Foundational to a phenomenological approach is the assumption that human experience is mediated through personal interpretation. The phenomenological approach provided a strong philosophical component that is missing from much of the literature on special education resiliency. “The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to the description of the universal essence” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). The aim of this study was to determine the experiences of special education teachers who proved resilient in an urban school district in order to “provide a comprehensive description” of the phenomenon described (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13).

As a pragmatist, this researcher focused “on the outcomes of the research – the actions, situations and consequences of inquiry, rather than antecedent conditions” (Creswell, 2013, p. 28). The researcher has over 13 years’ experience working as a
special education teacher. While the first 12 years were in the classroom at the high school level, at the time of this research, he elected to become a K-6 elementary resource specialist (RSP) teacher to gain elementary experience with a professional goal to become a more productive and experienced special education K-12 administrator. This year, the researcher has become a vice-principal and is pursuing his career in the field of education.

This study sought to offer informative insights into the lived experiences of special education teachers who proved resilient to the challenges of special education within the K-12 system. These insights may better prepare this researcher to understand the nature and value of resilience. It is a personal goal of the researcher to understand how administrators may better support and enhance the quality of life for special education teachers so the quality of education for students with disabilities may, in turn, be improved. This researcher sought to describe the structure and experiences of individuals based upon the perceptions they share of their experiences and the stories they tell (Moustakas, 1994).

**Conceptual Framework**

As most prior research has presented a study of teacher retention through the lens of attrition—a deficit view—the foundation for this current research draws heavily from the deficit model laying the groundwork for shifting the focus from “what’s broken” to “what works.” To inform the current study, three research streams were analyzed and reviewed: (a) teacher resiliency, (b) teacher characteristics and personal factors of attrition, and (c) the special education work environment. These three streams are seen as
being complementary to each other, offering a foundation for understanding how long-tenured special education teachers experience resiliency.

**Teacher resiliency.** According to Gordon-Rouse (2001), resiliency is defined as:

The ability to thrive, mature and increase competence in the face of adverse circumstances or obstacles. These circumstances may be severe and infrequent or chronic and consistent. In order to thrive, mature, and increase competence, a person must draw on all of their resources: biological, psychological, and environmental. Resilience, therefore, is a multifaceted phenomenon. (p. 461)

Teacher resiliency, when tied to the research on the K-12 work environment as well as teacher characteristics and personal factors of attrition, is expected to provide a rich foundation of literature that informs the current study of special education teachers.

In the late 1970s, Werner’s (2005) research identified and defined the phenomenon of “resiliency.” Werner concluded there were three clusters of protective factors that differentiated those who were resilient from those who were not. These factors included “protective factors within the individual,…protective factors within the family,…and protective factors within the community” (p. 12). In a related study, Day (2008) described “resilience and enduring commitment” as a product of three things: “personal and professional dispositions, values, as well as that of socially constructed” factors (p. 255). Further, Day and Gu (2009) concluded that resilience is based on the experience of long-tenured teachers being more exposed to policy and social change that often frustrates newer, less seasoned teachers. Recently Jones, Youngs, and Frank (2013) identified that relationships of special education teachers with their general education colleagues were important for new teachers to overcome the challenges they face. Specifically, they shared that their “perception of colleague support was a strong predictor of retention plans” (p. 365).
The literature review in Chapter 2 provides both the historical background of resiliency and focuses on current studies of the resiliency of special education teachers. The literature on teacher resiliency identified factors that positively influenced the retention of special education teachers but it is missing the personal voices describing the essence of the experiences of resilient teachers themselves.

Teacher characteristics and personal factors of attrition. Teacher characteristics and personal factors of attrition offer a deficit view of teacher tenure in the second stream. Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Whitener, and Weber (1997) found that teacher turnover decreased as the following variables increased: age, number of dependent children, level of education attainment, the span of years since the last degree was obtained, the level of teacher pay, and the increased level of teacher certification obtained. In related findings Miller, Brownell, and Smith (1999) identified that teachers with less experience leave the special education field and are significantly younger then those who stay. Finally, Billingsley (2007) found that “personal reasons (i.e., family/personal move, retirement, pregnancy/child-rearing) appear to be pivotal to decisions to leave” urban school districts (p. 13). The research on teacher characteristics and personal factors of attrition establishes factors that explain why special education teachers leave the profession, but little is known about the role of resilience in teachers who stay.

Work environment. This stream reviews the theory, research, and practice on the K-12 work environment conditions. Factors include salary, school climate, administrative support, paperwork, and caseload issues. Work environment factors the literature identifies as challenges to the resiliency of teachers are examined. This stream
also discusses the deficit model of why teachers choose to leave and why the work
environment is an important factor in the resiliency of special education teachers.

Gilpen (2011) concluded that the work environment has an effect on both
seasoned long-tenured and new inexperienced teachers. Likewise, Billingsley (2004b)
determined, “One of the most important challenges in the field of special education is
developing a qualified workforce and creating work environments that sustain special
educators’ involvement and commitment” (p. 39). Understanding the elements in the
work environment that impact teacher commitment may provide insights into how
context and circumstances impact teacher commitment and affect teacher resilience.

Among the studies reviewed in this stream are Guarino, Santibanez, and Daley’s
(2006) research that concluded that teachers who have higher education levels and
abilities are more likely to leave teaching. This may suggest that teachers who pursue
education leave the classroom to become administrators or assume other higher-level
roles within districts. Guarino et al. also concluded that urban districts with a high
proportion of minority students, lower income, and poor test scores have a higher attrition
rate for teachers than suburban and rural schools. Finally, they found that public schools
have a higher attrition rate than private schools.

The literature also recognized the importance of relationships for education
professionals, focusing in many instances on the role of the administration in developing
supportive work settings. According to Schlichte, Yssel, and Merbler (2005), “novice
teachers should not need to rely on a single source of support, such as their mentor
teachers. In addition to being supportive and helpful themselves, administrators need to
foster a collegial environment” (p. 39). Similarly, Day, Elliot, and Kingston (2005) concluded that personal and school context factors were the most significant in sustaining a teachers’ commitment and resiliency. Factors that made a difference included (a) having friends of similar professional interests and needs, (b) a stable emotional environment at home, (c) social life outside of education, (d) leadership and school culture, (e) self-efficacy, (f) feeling you are doing a good job, (g) sharing with and supporting peers, (h) positive feedback from colleagues, (i) working with parents to bring about change, (j) shared educational values in the school context, and (k) children in class and dynamic work environments (Day et al., 2005).

**Summary of the conceptual framework.**

![Figure 2. Conceptual framework for the study.](image)
Complementary to each other, the three streams offer a foundation for understanding the factors impacting the resiliency of special education teachers. The initial stream defines the phenomenon of resilience. An understanding of the literature on special education teacher characteristics and personal factors may explain how attributes including age, gender, race, and other personal factors affect teacher commitment. Finally, understanding K-12 work environments offers insights into the factors in a teacher’s work life such as salary, school climate, and administrative support that may impact on resilience. By including the primarily deficit research drawn from studies of teacher attrition, a foundation for understanding the phenomenon of resiliency in special education teachers may be developed.

**Definition of Terms**

**Administrative Support**

School administrator “effectiveness in assisting teachers with issues such as student discipline, instructional methods, curriculum, and adjusting to the school environment” (Borman & Dowling, 2008, p. 380).

**Attrition**

Teachers who leave classroom teaching either by resignation or by transfer to general education positions (within the same or different districts)

**Highly Qualified Teacher**

“To be deemed highly qualified, teachers must have: 1) a bachelor’s degree, 2) full state certification or licensure, and 3) prove that they know each subject they teach” (U.S. Department of Education, 2014, para. 11).
Leavers

Those teachers who left their special education teaching position in a school district (Billingsley, 2007)

Resiliency

According to Gordon-Rouse (2001), resiliency is:

The ability to thrive, mature and increase competence in the face of adverse circumstances or obstacles. These circumstances may be severe and infrequent or chronic and consistent. In order to thrive, mature, and increase competence, a person must draw on all of their resources: biological, psychological, and environmental. Resilience, therefore, is a multifaceted phenomenon. (p. 461)

Retention

Special education teachers who remain in the teaching classroom in the same district as the previous year

Special Education

(a) General.

(1) Special education means specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability, including—

(i) Instruction conducted in the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and institutions, and in other settings; and

(ii) Instruction in physical education.

(2) Special education includes each of the following, if the services otherwise meet the requirements of paragraph (a)(1) of this section—

(i) Speech-language pathology services, or any other related service, if the service is considered special education rather than a related service under State standards;

(ii) Travel training; and

(iii) Vocational education. (IDEA, 2004; P.L. 108-446)

Stayers and Movers

*Stayers* are those teachers who remained at the same school. *Movers* are those teachers who moved to a different school (Aud et al., 2011).
Teacher Commitment

“(a) A cognitive and affective acceptance of the profession, (b) a willingness to exert considerable effort for the profession, and (c) a strong intent or desire to remain with the profession” (Chan, Lau, Nie, Lim, & Hogan, 2008, p. 602).

Assumptions and Limitations

As a special education teacher who has taught in a Title 1, urban school district for over 12 years, the researcher held four assumptions that may have had an influence on this study: (a) Due to economic disadvantages and increased unemployment at this time, many special education teachers who may have otherwise transitioned positions or careers have stayed in their current position due to economic uncertainty. (b) Secondly, special education teachers require a great deal of administrative skill; therefore, it is a natural stepping-stone for special education teachers to pursue administrative careers and leave the classroom. (c) Between teacher and administrator, the administrator has the greatest influence on a teacher’s decision to be a stayer or decide to change schools or districts. (d) Lastly, being in a low socio-economic district, many teachers may choose to leave to work in a more suburban socio-advantageous district after gaining experience.

The limitations to this study include that it is based on a sampling of 19 special education teachers in a single district in northern California that is a Title I, urban school district. Findings may not reflect research into suburban and rural school districts in California or nationwide. While the subjects were chosen through purposeful sampling, the findings may not reflect the experiences of all special education teachers in the TRUSD.
Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the phenomenon of resilience through the shared lived experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of long-tenured (10 or more years) special education teachers in the TRUSD. In a time when special education teacher attrition rates are greater than those of any other teacher category, schools and districts may benefit from understanding what fosters the resilience of long-tenured teachers. The three streams of theory, research, and practice that informed this study include (a) teacher resiliency, (b) teacher characteristics and personal factors of attrition, and (c) the work environment. The three streams are discussed in detail in Chapter 2.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

**Introduction to Chapter 2**

While extensive research has been done on why teachers leave the teaching field, only limited research currently addresses how the phenomenon of resilience supports teachers who stay. The gap frames the purpose of this present study that sought to explore why some special education teachers remain in the field. This research hopes to offer insights into the teachers’ experiences to better serve the needs of entering special education teachers. In a report by the National Center for Education (as cited in Henkin & Holliman, 2009) stated:

Teacher attrition is expected to average 8% per year in the next five years, and 50% of current high school teachers, 42% of middle school teachers, and 36% of elementary school teachers have indicated that they do not expect to be teaching in K-12 schools [in the future]. (p. 164)

The three research streams for this phenomenological dissertation include (a) a synthesis of studies of teacher resilience, (b) a deficit-view of teacher characteristics and personal factors identified primarily through studies of attrition, and (c) a review of research related to K-12 work environment and, specifically, the special education work environment. Each of the three streams is complementary to the others and the three together offer a strong foundation for the current study. The review that follows is intended to provide an overview of the theory, research, and practice of each stream and inform the present study.

Billingsley (1993) has been recognized by many as one of the leading experts in the field of special education teacher attrition and retention. Much of the literature reviewed in the second stream includes her landmark work and has been the basis for
interest in the current research. Although Billingsley (2003, 2004a, 2005, 2007) has continued to add to the conversation on attrition and retention, her initial publication (1995) is the most pertinent and foundational to the focus of this study.

In a time of special education teacher shortages, it is important for school administrators and district leaders to question, “What can we do to increase the retention of qualified educators?” In looking at the phenomenon of resiliency and hearing the voices of teachers who have chosen to remain in the special education field, this research hopes to offer a better understanding of what compels special education teachers to stay.

Figure 3. Graphical representation of the three research streams.
Literature Review

The first stream is a review of teacher resiliency literature. The second stream reviews special education teacher characteristics and personal factors of attrition. Finally, the third stream reviews the literature on public K-12 work environments.

Teacher Resiliency

Like all individuals, teachers have life experiences and challenges that may affect their duties as educators. Teachers who are resilient are those who may have overcome obstacles and were able to bounce back from the challenges they faced in the classroom or in their personal lives. Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000) defined resiliency as the “dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (p. 543). According to Gordon-Rouse (2001), resiliency is:

The ability to thrive, mature and increase competence in the face of adverse circumstances or obstacles. These circumstances may be severe and infrequent or chronic and consistent. In order to thrive, mature, and increase competence, a person must draw on all of their resources: biological, psychological, and environmental. Resilience, therefore, is a multifaceted phenomenon. (p. 461)

Since districts face the greatest challenge of keeping highly qualified special education teachers, the need for resilient educators becomes even bigger. The literature on teacher resilience is considered here to understand the factors that lead long-tenured teachers to continue working with students with disabilities. The fact that special education teacher turnover is highest of teachers in all public school categories may be valuable data for administrators to reflect upon in order to retain qualified individuals and better meet the overall needs of students.

Werner (2005), in her 1970s longitudinal research with socio-economically disadvantaged children in Hawaii, framed a complex view of resilience. In Werner’s
landmark studies, she found that that one-third of the children in her study were able to overcome their situation and she defined these children as “resilient” for doing so. Resilient children were able to overcome the challenges of their situations and prove resilient and successful in life. Among her findings in this longitudinal study, Werner (2005) concluded there were three clusters of protective factors that differentiated those who were resilient from those who were not. These factors included: “protective factors within the individual,” “protective factors within the family,” “and protective factors within the community” (p. 12). In regard to individual factors, Werner found “they had more realistic education and vocational plans, and higher expectations for their future than did their peers with coping problems” (p. 12). With family, she found individuals who were resilient had family support in addition to extended family as well as community support from community involvement, friends, mentors, and teachers. Werner’s longitudinal study of resiliency is important to note because it has informed current studies in the psychology, education, and theory of resiliency and offered an understanding of the roles played by one’s self, extended family, and community in overcoming obstacles. The research offered a model of resilience that also informs the present study.

Cause and effect has been the basis for many studies about resilience. In a mixed methods 4-year research project that focused on the variations in teachers’ work, lives, and effectiveness, Day (2008) described “resilience, and enduring commitment” as a product of three things: “personal and professional dispositions, values, as well as that of socially constructed” factors (p. 255). According to Brown and Wynn (2009), other factors that positively influenced the resilience and commitment of teachers included the
size of the school, its location (urban, suburban, rural), income compensation, grade level taught, and the type of school. Day and Gu (2009) concluded that most of the research on teaching has focused on the early years of teaching and little has been conducted on the service of long-tenured teachers. Further, their research suggested that long-tenured teachers were more exposed to policy and social change that often frustrated newer, less seasoned teachers. Their conclusions suggested that long-tenured teachers who overcame the challenges of the first years of teaching proved more resilient to policy and social change; and their adaptability was often a factor in decreased attrition within school settings. Finally, Razak, Darmawan, and Keeves (2010) found that influences on the resilience of long-tenured teachers were identified as culture, school leadership, and school working conditions.

Studying the relationship between school leadership and teacher resilience is a recent quantitative survey study of 1,014 teachers by Ling and Ibrahim (2013) that concluded that the school principal is the most important and influential individual in a school. They concluded from their study that school leadership, as the most influential in a school setting, and specifically the principal, has a direct effect on teacher resiliency. Ross and Gray (2004) and Amoroso (2002) also found that leadership has a direct effect on teacher resiliency. Specifically in the Amoroso study, positive effects were found when principals were actively leading staff, giving their support to staff, and challenging staff. Each of these effects was considered to be influential in increasing teacher resiliency and job satisfaction and reinforced the importance of the role of a school principal. Nagel and Brown (2003) determined that “administrators particularly are in a prime position to affect stress within their schools” (p. 257). Their findings suggested
that leaders within schools play a particular role in either influencing the resiliency of teachers or directly impacting their decisions to leave the field.

In one of the very few qualitative phenomenological studies of teacher resiliency, Meister and Ahrens (2011) studied four long-tenured teachers who had proven committed and resisted plateauing. The findings of this study indicated that among the factors that influenced teacher resilience was site leadership, the positive effects of teachers’ impact on the lives of students, and the relationships and interactions with colleagues. Lastly, Meister and Ahrens found that “individual support systems helped them” overcome challenges when faced with frustrating situations (p. 770).

To increase resilience in the teaching profession, Woods and Weasmer (2002) suggested teachers should have a personal support system that enables them to reduce stress. They suggested that this system could include relationships outside of work, personal hobbies, or extra-curricular activities such as volunteer work, exercising at a gym, or joining community organizations. They recognized that sometimes teachers were simply not a right match for a particular administration or school and actually benefitted from a placement change.

Green (2011) employed a quantitative survey design targeting 4,000 Los Angeles School District special education teachers. The purpose of the research was to examine demographics as a factor in the commitment and resiliency of special education teachers in an urban school district. Green sought to identify specific factors that special education teachers targeted as their reasons for leaving their current positions. Factors found to be associated with lower levels of commitment and increased attrition included: (a) a lack of administrative support, (b) workload issues such as paperwork, (c) and salary
concerns. These were all identified as major factors that led to a decreased level of commitment and increased numbers of special education teachers in an urban setting leaving the field. Green also identified that (d) a lack of parental support, (e) a poor school climate, (f) inadequate materials and resources, (g) a lack of respect for the teacher’s position, (h) behavior, (i) a lack of professional development and training, (j) interactions with colleagues, (k) a lack of support within the community, (l) negative teacher relationships, and lastly, (m) a negative teacher-student relationship were factors that influenced commitment. These findings identify factors that affect teacher resiliency and commitment.

Studies reflecting the importance of collegial support and relationships for new special education teachers are among the literature on teacher resiliency (Berry, 2012). The research suggests that often special education teachers feel isolated and underappreciated compared to their general education colleagues. Jones et al. (2013) found special education teachers’ relationships with their general education colleagues are important for new teachers, who gain support through such relationships for overcoming the challenges they face. Specifically, they shared that the “perception of colleague support was a strong predictor of retention plans” (p. 365). They recommended districts encourage the facilitation of special education and general education teacher relationships. They concluded, “one important predictor of teachers' career decisions is their commitment to their schools and to the teaching profession. Resilient teachers are more likely to exert effort in their jobs, work toward school goals, and stay in their schools” (pp. 365-366).
Jones et al. (2013) surveyed special education teachers and found that the resiliency of teachers in urban school districts is more challenged than that of rural and suburban teachers. They also noted that when special education teachers begin the school year with low levels of commitment, they “were more susceptible to altering their plans to remain in their assignments by the spring” (p. 374). Their study concluded that teacher resilience and commitment is a key factor in increasing and improving retention and decreasing attrition rates.

According to Henkin and Holliman (2009), “commitment is linked to the idea that strongly committed persons identify with, are involved in, and enjoy membership in an organization” (p. 165). Teachers who participated in this study identified the need to be a part of the organization in which they served. To stay resilient, teachers needed to feel they were part of the team and were an important and essential player in meeting the needs of the students they served.

Teacher resiliency appears to be strongly related to the connectedness they feel with the organization in which they teach, the colleagues they work with, and the leaders who lead them (Berry, 2012; Jones et al., 2013). Among Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs is the primary need for belonging and self-esteem, an element of which is the need for friendship and respect by others. It is human nature to need to feel connected to a group and have a sense of belonging. Without it, teachers may be more apt to burn out or leave to get needs met elsewhere. Berry (2012) specifically found that special education teacher resiliency and commitment was related to three factors that seem to be a theme in the literature of special education teacher retention and attrition:
(a) the support of administration, principals, and leadership within a district; (b) the support of general education colleagues; and (c) the overall understanding of the role of special educators in sharing the responsibilities of serving students who have disabilities in schools. (p. 3)

The literature on teacher resiliency resoundingly advocates that teacher commitment is affected by relationships with administrators and general education colleagues. Being connected to the organization is a variable that research suggests has a direct effect on a teacher’s decision to stay or leave. Special education teachers who have support from others may be more likely to stay in their position and this may be important for districts to consider when retaining qualified teachers. Among other key points in this stream is the importance of school climate, professional development, and behavior as factors that affect the resiliency of special education teachers.

**Special Education Teacher Characteristics and Personal Factors of Attrition**

When considering special education teacher attrition in public schools, those seeking an overall understanding of why teachers leave have identified characteristics and personal factors that are demographic in nature. Some of the themes that have emerged from prior research reveal that age is a definite factor in the attrition of special education teachers. Those teachers who overcome the challenges inherent in the first few years of teaching have been found to be more resilient and often choose teaching as a career from which they retire (Billingsley, 1993; Boe et al., 1997; Miller et al., 1999; Singer, 1999). Another salient factor appears to be gender, although the research on this factor is contradictory (Guarino et al., 2006; Singer, 1999). The conflict may reflect the changing of societal roles over time. A broad array of other factors is discussed in this research stream.
Age. In the literature on teacher characteristics and personal factors of attrition, age has been the most consistent determinant of teacher attrition, as new and younger teachers are more likely to leave the field than older special education teachers. Boe et al.’s (1997) study suggested that turnover decreases as the following variables increase: age, number of dependent children, level of education attainment, the span of years since the last degree was obtained, the level of teacher pay, and the increased level of teacher certification obtained. Singer (1993) found that new teachers were more likely to leave the field in the first few years of hire, and those who survived the first few years continued teaching for many years. Similarly Miller et al. (1999) concluded that teachers with less experience leave the special education field and are significantly younger than those who stay. Billingsley (1993) determined that younger teachers have the greatest attrition, those in middle years have the lowest attrition, and once again a peak in attrition occurs as teachers reach the age of retirement.

Age appears to be a key determinate of teacher attrition and reflects that those who stay in the field likely were able to overcome the challenges of the first few years when most special educators leave. According to Woods and Weasner (2002):

Twelve percent of all teachers with three or fewer years of experience and eleven percent of teachers with twenty or more years of experience left the teaching profession in 2008–09, compared with five percent of teachers with ten to nineteen years of experience. (p. 94)

Dee, Henkin, and Singleton (2006) reinforced this finding noting, “a smaller percentage of teachers with the highest amount of experience moved schools (five percent), compared with teachers with three or fewer years (thirteen percent) or four to nine years of experiences (nine percent)” (p. 94).
Gender. Like age, gender is a teacher characteristic that has been studied to determine its effects on teacher attrition. Unlike age, gender appears to have a lesser role in affecting attrition. According to Singer (1993), females leave at a higher rate than males but return to the classroom at a similar rate as their male counterparts. Likewise, Boe et al. (1997) did not find any significant discrepancy between both general and special education rates in regards to gender. According to the literature reviewed, there were no significant and consistent findings on the relationship between gender and attrition rates of special education teachers. Contrary to the majority of research reviewed, Guarino et al.’s (2006) research suggested, “women raising children might choose or be constrained to exit the labor force” and they found that females have a higher attrition rate than males (p. 188). result on the discrepancies and results of studies on this topic.

Race. The race or ethnicity of the teacher is among the personal characteristics and factors studied related to special education teachers’ attrition. According to the literature reviewed, there have been conflicting findings about the impact of race on attrition between races of teachers working with children who have disabilities. Boe et al. (1999) found no discrepancy between the attrition rates of different ethnicities of teachers. Miller et al. (1999) and Singer (1993) found no race or ethnicity factors influencing the attrition of special educators. Conversely, a 1994 study by Cross and Billingsley found that Caucasian teachers were more likely to stay than teachers of other races. Further research may be needed to clarify this discrepancy.

Other personal factors. When looking at personal factors that contribute to special education teacher attrition and retention, Billingsley, Carlson, and Klein (2004)
shared, “various reasons have been posited about the high rates of attrition among beginning teachers, including personal reasons (e.g., child-rearing), other opportunities, and dissatisfaction with teaching” (p. 333). Further, Billingsley (2007) found that “personal reasons (i.e., family/personal move, retirement, pregnancy/child-rearing) appear to be pivotal to decisions to leave” urban school districts (p. 13).

In a meta-analytic and narrative review of the research on attrition, Borman and Dowling (2008) found that studies dealing with marital status and attrition:

Suggested that the odds of married teachers leaving the profession were 1.40 times greater than those for non-married teachers. Though this difference was not of considerable practical significance, it was statistically significant ($z = 2.40, p < .05$). Second, the event of having a new child was associated with odds of attrition 6.69 times greater relative to the odds for teachers not having a new child ($z = 7.92, p < .01$). Finally, the number of children in the teacher’s family was not associated with any difference for the attrition outcome. (p. 385)

Personality factors also appear to influence attrition. Demik (2008) utilized narrative inquiry to determine that differences in the personalities of special education teachers “drove them toward unique responses to the pressures of the job, causing some to choose to stay in the field and others to leave” (p. 22). This study was based on a sample of five special education teachers and further research may identify more specific personality traits that affect teacher attrition.

In this stream, this researcher looked at the literature on teacher characteristics—age, gender, race, and other factors—that have previously been found to affect teacher attrition. This literature is mostly quantitative in nature. It is based on searching for deficits that impact attrition. Findings have been somewhat contradictory and further study appears to be needed regarding difference based on race or gender. The literature,
while purporting to describe aspects of retention, has largely been concerned with what is lacking.

**Work Environment**

Some of the factors considered in this section on the work environment include the administrative support of school leadership, salary levels, relationship with general education colleagues, training and professional development of teachers as well as school climate, poverty, and setting (urban, suburban, or rural). Billingsley (2004) described, “one of the most important challenges in the field of special education is developing a qualified workforce in creating work environments that sustain special educators’ involvement and commitment” (p. 39). Also of importance in this stream is recognition of how school climate affects teachers. Overall, the research indicated that administrative support was identified to be a key factor in a teacher choosing to leave the field.

In a quantitative study using the Teacher Follow Up Survey of 2000–2001 and 2004–2005, Gilpin (2011) concluded that the difference in wages of teachers mostly affected the decision to leave teaching by teachers who were inexperienced and had less than six years of teaching experience. His findings suggested that as teachers became tenured, they were more likely to stay in teaching and not leave to choose other careers based on occupational salary. Gilpin also concluded that the work environment has an effect on both seasoned long-tenured and new inexperienced teachers.

In an empirical review of the literature on teacher turnover, Guarino et al. (2006) found that the highest turnover rates among teachers occurred in the first few years. Their findings indicated that among the reasons for higher attrition rates were that new
teachers felt inadequately trained and unsupported in their new roles as teachers. New teachers seemed to explore the labor market more than tenured teachers and were less likely to accept poorer working conditions. Further, the data from their study suggested that higher wages had a direct effect on young teachers’ responsiveness to stay in their district and profession. Their study concluded that when schools offer new teacher mentoring and induction programs, as well as provide support from school leadership, attrition rates dramatically decrease (Guarnio et al., 2006). While long-tenured teachers are less likely to leave teaching as a career, they may change schools or districts as the work environment changes. Past research has shown that over half of all teacher movement has been due to migration between schools (Ingersoll, 2001).

Guarino et al. (2006) further concluded that teachers who have higher education levels and abilities were more likely to leave teaching. This may mean that teachers who pursue education leave teaching to become administrators or to assume leadership roles within districts. They also concluded that urban districts and those with high proportions of minority students, low income, and poor test scores have higher attrition rates than suburban and rural schools. Finally, in the data they collected, public schools had a higher attrition rate than private schools.

Billingsley (2007) found that a lack of support from administrators was most frequently ranked as the most influential factor in a teacher’s decision to leave the field. According to her findings, the most influential factors included “inadequate support from central administration” ranked “8.1%; inadequate support from principal 7.1%; inappropriate placement of students with disabilities 6.1%; and class size/caseload too large 5%” (p. 14). Her data are consistent with those of other studies suggesting teachers
are greatly affected by their work environments (Cross & Billingsley, 1994; Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001). Specific factors that have an influence on overall job approval include access to materials, inadequate training, excessive paperwork, isolation, and a lack of support and understanding from site administration. Teachers who experienced these factors in combination were affected more negatively and were more susceptible to negative feelings toward their careers that then caused attrition.

Schlitchte et al. (2005) concluded:

Strongly forged relationships and the accompanying feelings of emotional well-being are protective factors and critical to retention. Until the primary need of belonging has been met, first-year teachers seem to find that they do not have enough of anything else to encourage them to stay. (p. 39)

Teachers sought to have their needs met and have a sense of belonging. Special education teachers who were new also needed to feel they were developing their skills and that their duties were making a difference and were purposeful to the lives of students. New teachers need support, and administrators at school sites and within the district need to provide opportunities for experience.

Schlichte et al. (2005) noted, “novice teachers should not need to rely on a single source of support, such as their mentor teachers. In addition to being supportive and helpful themselves, administrators need to foster a collegial environment” (p. 39). Berry (2012) studied teachers’ attitudes toward their work environments and found they were increasingly correlated with the following factors:

(a) The helpfulness of support from administrators, (b) the helpfulness of general education teachers, (c) whether the administrators and general education teachers understood the special educators' roles and responsibilities, and (d) when teachers reported a shared responsibility for the education of students. (p. 12)
When referring to teacher commitment to the profession, Henkin and Holliman (2009) further stated, “leaders who comprehend the linkages between commitment and increased organizational involvement in school management and decision making are in an advantaged position as they endeavor to improve the quality of the individual work experience and related teacher performance” (p. 174). Finally, Day et al. (2005) found that personal and school context factors were the most significant in sustaining teachers’ commitment and resiliency to the profession. Factors that were among their findings included:

- Having friends of similar professional interests and needs, a stable emotional environment at home, social life outside of education, leadership and school culture, self-efficacy, feeling you are doing a good job and can make a difference, sharing with and supporting peers, positive feedback from colleagues, working with parents to bring about change, shared educational values in the school context, children in class and dynamic work environments. (Day et al., 2005, pp. 572-573)

Day et al. concluded:

- Personal factors that appeared to diminish commitment to teaching were those that were associated with life events or phases—for example, marriage breakdowns, deaths, family illness, reduction in energy levels through declining health or energy levels/imbalance in work-life activities. (p. 573)

Chambers (2011) conducted a phenomenological study that utilized interviews of Nationally Board Certified special education teachers. Chambers explored factors that led to the attrition of special education teachers. This study concluded that variables in the work environment that led to teacher attrition included the following: salary levels, unsupportive leadership, a lack of professional development and training opportunities, students, and the responsibility of roles within the school. The study reinforced previous conclusions that suggested leadership is a key determinate in teacher attrition, along with
the work environment being a key factor in a teacher’s decision to stay or leave. The current study explored how teachers who overcame the first few years and proved resilient by staying in the field of special education found positive attributes in the environment.

Summary

While a broad perspective of differing variables was explored in this literature review, the three streams of teacher resiliency, special education teacher characteristics and personal factors, and the work environment form a basis for an overview on the attrition and retention problem of special education teachers within public school districts. While the foundation of the three streams seeks to formulate a basis for why teachers choose to leave the field, this study sought to add to the literature and give the perspectives of resilient special educators who chose to stay. Looking across the vast research of teacher resiliency, the data in the literature reflect a vast array of factors that lead to the attrition of special education teachers. This study, however, will add to the anti-deficit literature in developing a phenomenological study as to why long-tenured teachers stay resilient in their positions and give voice to their experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of being resilient special education teachers.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

**Introduction**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the phenomenon of resilience through the shared lived experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of long-tenured (10 or more years) special education teachers in the TRUSD. Special education teachers have statistically higher attrition and mobility rates as compared to their general education peers. The California Department of Education (2011) concluded that turnover causes shortages and interferes with efforts by schools to improve, “costing California an estimated $700 million a year in replacement costs for teachers who leave before retirement” (para. 3). The present qualitative study explored the phenomenon of teacher resilience as it emerged from thick, rich descriptions offered by the participants. This research sought to offer a view of what keeps teachers in role through the lens of resilience rather than the frequently researched deficit view formed by studying teachers who leave the field.

The following research questions will be used to guide the research:

1. What is the nature or essence of the experience of teaching special education for many years?
2. How do special education teachers describe what compels them to stay in the special education classroom?
3. How do long-tenured special education teachers understand and perceive the nature of their resiliency?
To understand the phenomenon of resiliency for special education teachers, a qualitative approach was taken. Moustakas (1994) noted that qualitative research enables the researcher to look at the “wholeness of the experience while searching for essences of the experiences rather than measurements and explanation” (p. 21). A phenomenological research design was utilized to gain insights into the lived experiences of special education teachers in the TRUSD and provide an analysis of the essence of resilient teachers. In exploring the perceptions and lived experiences of special education teachers with long-standing tenure (10 or more years), this research sought to give voice to their experiences with a goal of understanding the essence of their resiliency.

This chapter reviews the research population and site including site access. The research design and rationale are next, followed by a detailed description of the research methods and strategies used to collect data. Finally, a discussion of ethical considerations is offered.

**Site and Population**

**Site Description**

The TRUSD is an urban, ethnically diverse Title 1 district that serves over 28,000 students (Dataquest, 2011). The district has over 40 first languages spoken in students’ homes representing a wide range of ethnicities. According to the adopted District Budget of 2012-2013, the largest ethnicity represented was Hispanic at 41.04%, followed by Caucasian with 26.14%, African American at 16.29%, Asian at 9.54%, two or more races represented by 3.31%, Pacific Islander with 1.67%, Filipino with 1.20%, and American Indian/Alaskan Native with 0.81%.
TRUSD was formed by voters’ approval of Measure B in November of 2007. This landmark measure merged four North Sacramento (California) area school districts with the goal of improving and enhancing educational services. This included the consolidation of the North Sacramento School District, the Del Paso Heights School District, the Rio Linda Union School District, and the Grant Joint Union High School District. In its current iteration, TRUSD is a large district that includes parts of North Sacramento, Del Paso Heights, Rio Linda, Foothill Farms, and North Highlands and encompasses 120 square miles. The district has nine high schools, 10 middle or junior high schools, and 33 mixed K-8 elementary schools. As of November 2013, there were approximately 165 special education teachers and the district has an overall average rate of 21.9 pupils per the combined number of special and general educators.

Population Description

The district has 74 school site administrators and 1,511 teachers. The 165 special education teachers teach in a variety of special education positions including Special Day Classes (SDC) and Resource Specialists (RSP) in preschool to adult settings.

The participants in this study included 19 credentialed special education teachers at the elementary, middle, and high school levels with 10 or more years of experience in the TRUSD. The teachers were assigned as Resource Specialist (RSP) teachers or Special Day Class teachers (SDC). Since the district was consolidated as the TRUSD in 2007, the prerequisites for participation in this study were that the teachers had to be highly qualified, fully certified, and had to have taught for 10 or more years in the TRUSD and one of the former districts that merged to become TRUSD without breaks in employment. These teachers may have changed sites or positions within the TRUSD as a
result of organizational changes, including the closing of schools or programs. Further, to help bracket out any researcher bias, participants were not teachers with whom the researcher personally worked within the recent five years.

It was originally expected that 50\% of the special education teachers, at the time of the study, would meet the study specifications (approximately 80 teachers). It was from this group that a sample of 19 participants emerged through self-selection. With regard to the demographics of the participants, no consideration for ethnicity, age, or gender was a factor in choosing a participant. Participation was strictly voluntary from the pool of special education teachers in the district who fit the prerequisites. Twelve teachers were placed in the semi-structured interviews and seven more participated in a separate focus group.

Site Access

Because the researcher was an employee of the TRUSD, access to site and staff was available. To specifically access teachers, there was a review of the researcher’s request by the District Superintendent who interviewed the researcher. Once the Superintendent initially authorized permission in writing, approval of the Drexel University Institutional Review Board (IRB) was sought. Approval reflected appropriate attention to research standards and ethical issues described later in this chapter.

Research Design and Rationale

Phenomenology

To meet the objectives of this study, a phenomenological research design was used. A phenomenological study “provides a logical, systematic, and coherent resource” that is needed “to arrive at essential descriptions of experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 47).
Creswell (2007) defined a phenomenological study as one that “describes the meaning of several individuals’ lived experiences of a phenomenon” (p. 57).

This research sought to understand the personal lived experiences of several individuals within the TRUSD who taught teaching special education for over 10 years and experienced the phenomenon of resilience. The qualitative data were collected by interviewing long-tenured special education teachers. Based on the essence of the descriptions participants offered with their experiences, the researcher then developed a strong description of the resilience these individuals shared.

Moustakas (1994) shared, “with examining entities from many sides, angles and perspectives…the essence of a phenomenon or experience is achieved” (p. 58). The researcher, who also had extensive experience with teaching special education in this school district, bracketed out personal assumptions and described personal experiences with this phenomenon so he “[could] focus on the experiences of the participants in the study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 78). Further, this researcher acquired the skill of epoche, that is “to refrain from judgment, to abstain from or stay away from everyday, ordinary ways of perceiving things” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). It was done to make this study’s findings more reliable. It took careful focus to bracket out previous assumptions and ensure the study was undertaken with a focus on the experiences voiced by the participants with the meanings they ascribed to the experiences.

The rationale for choosing a phenomenological approach was that it would provide a strong philosophical component missing from much of the literature on special education attrition. Billingsley (2003) suggested, “an in-depth analysis of stayers would provide a better understanding of resilience and why some teachers are able to stay in a
certain position for many years” (p. 34). Choosing a qualitative, phenomenological approach best met this need and adds to the conversation of seeking “to reveal more fully the essences and meaning of the human experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 105). Little qualitative research exists regarding the essence of teacher resiliency of long-tenured teachers and even less has been completed specific to special education where there is the greatest percentage of those leaving the field.

**Research Methods**

The first step in the process of data collection was to obtain Drexel University IRB approval. Once IRB permission was granted, this researcher sought participants. The researcher sought 19 participants, 12 participants for semi-structured interviews and seven for a separate focus group. Individuals were assigned to each treatment randomly with the first 12 volunteers being asked to participate in interviews. They were individuals with whom the researcher had not worked directly within the recent five years to better bracket out previous assumptions and bias.

During the interviews, personal, lived experiences were queried using open-ended questions. All interviews were recorded so field observations and notes could be taken. Once interviews were completed, they were then be transcribed. Data organization and analysis were continuous processes as the researcher began to analyze the data and get “a sense of the whole database” (Creswell, 2007, p. 183). Beyond interviews and a focus group, a researcher’s journal with field notes and observations were kept to develop triangulated methods.
Description of Methods Used

The methods of data collection for this phenomenological study included (a) in-depth, semi-structured interviews, (b) focus group, and (c) researcher’s journal containing field notes and observations.

**Interviews.** Twelve 30- to 45-minute face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with special education teachers with whom the researcher had not worked directly in the recent five years.

**Instrument description.** An interview protocol form identifying 10 open-ended questions (see Appendix A) was used. In addition to the stated open-ended questions, probing questions were used to explore each participant’s experiences in greater depth. Interviews took 30-45 minutes each.
**Participant selection.** District special education administrators provided a list of the eligible teachers based on meeting tenure and certification requirements within the TRUSD. Participants had to hold the appropriate certification and teach in an elementary, junior high, or high school RSP or SDC program. The provided list was reviewed to eliminate those teachers who had previously worked directly with the researcher in the recent five years. All those remaining on the list were sent an email asking for their participation (see Appendix B).

**Identification and invitation.** Participants were recruited via an email inviting them to volunteer to participate. The researcher assigned the first 12 volunteers who responded to the email into the one-to-one interviews on a first-come, first-included basis.

The researcher contacted, by email or phone, those who volunteered to participate to personally review the purpose of the study, the commitment required for participation, and the elements important to their consent (see Appendix C). Based on this information, those participants who agreed to be interviewed were assigned a random identifier (pseudonym) for use throughout the study and scheduled an interview.

**Data collection.** During the field research and data collection phase, interviews were conducted face-to-face in a quiet, distraction-free environment that was convenient for the interviewee to attend. Prior to beginning the interview, the consent process was be reviewed with each participant. Because no record of actual names was maintained and only pseudonyms were used for participants, only a verbal consent process was necessary.
Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes to 45 minutes. Data for the interviews were collected through the use of open-ended questions and follow-up probes and supported by descriptive and reflective interview notes. Two audio recordings of the interview and a written transcription of the entire interview session were made.

To maintain ethical standards, both the interviewees and researcher used pseudonyms in referring to the participants or in making any reference to their students. Further, all data were maintained on a drive without Internet access. Both transcribed data and the drive were kept in the same locked cabinet according to Drexel University IRB requirements and utilized only for the purposes of this research study.

**Data analysis.** In the data analysis phase of this study, transcripts of the interviews, focus group, and researchers journal were reviewed by the co-researcher and synthesized into codes. Codes were further reviewed to develop categories and themes. Then, the researcher began to “develop clusters of meaning from the significant statements, “sentences,” and “quotes” “into themes” (Moustakas as cited by Creswell, 2007, p. 82). As this process of coding, classifying, and looking for categories or themes developed, the researcher began to “make sense of the data” and “interpret” the “codes and themes to the larger meaning of the data” (Creswell, 2007, p. 187). It was the goal of this researcher that the findings added to the conversation and literature on special education teacher resiliency.

**Focus group.** Using the same invitation process noted in the information on interviews, a focus group was conducted with a group of seven additional special education teachers from the district (who did not participate in the semi-structured interviews). The goal of this dialogue was to create a more complete understanding of
the themes and potential findings in order “(a) to augment the information obtained, and (b) to provide additional data to ensure trustworthiness and credibility” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 123).

**Instrument Description.** A 60- to 90-minute focus group allowed the conversation about resilience to further emerge. A protocol with five questions was used as the basis for the dialogue that emerged from the focus group (see Appendix D).

**Participant selection.** Drawing from the same process described in the interview section, District special education administrators were consulted to identify the pool of eligible participants based on meeting tenure and certification requirements within TRUSD. Participants had to hold the appropriate certification and teach in an elementary, junior high, or high school RSP or SDC program. Once the list was provided, it was reviewed to eliminate those teachers who had previously worked directly with the researcher. All those remaining on the list were sent an email asking for their participation (see Appendix B).

**Identification and invitation.** Participants were recruited via the same email and during the same process described in the section on interviews. Volunteers 13-19, who did not participate in the interviews, were assigned to the focus group process.

The researcher contacted those who volunteered to participate by phone to describe the focus group, personally review the purpose of the study, describe the commitment required for participation, and review the elements important to their consent. Those participants who agreed to participate in the focus group based on the above information, were informed of the date, time, and location at which the focus group was held.
**Data collection.** Data for the focus group were collected through the use of open-ended questions and follow-up probes and supported by descriptive and reflective interview notes. Two audio recordings of the focus group and a written transcription of the entire interview session were made.

To maintain ethical standards, the focus group members are only identified by pseudonyms in reference to the participants or to their students. Further, all data were maintained on a drive without Internet access. Both transcribed data and the drive were kept in the same locked cabinet according to Drexel University IRB requirements and utilized only for the purposes of this research study. Field notes and observations were made as well to identify any key points or observations that emerged.

**Data analysis.** In the data analysis phase of this portion, methods, transcripts of the focus group, and field note data were reviewed and synthesized into codes. Codes were further reviewed to develop categories and themes. Then, the researcher began to conduct horizontal analysis of the data to align findings with other methods utilized. Data were then developed into clusters and themes aligned with the interviews and field notes in the researcher’s journal that were collected throughout the study.

**Researcher’s journal.**

**Instrument description.** The researcher kept a journal that included field notes of observations made during the interviews and focus group. Data, such as non-verbal cues or environmental factors, were noted. These reflective notes were utilized to provide additional context to the interview and focus group process. The field notes were used to identify congruence between the interviews and focus group. Further, notes were made as deemed relevant in the process to allow further data to be collected to get an overall
glimpse of the phenomenon and essence of these unique participants. Only pseudonyms were used in the observations and field notes.

**Data collection.** All field notes were kept in a written research journal and analyzed and coded for data. To make the data valid and credible, field notes added to the triangulation of data to better identify the underlying themes and create a study considered reliable and free of bias and reactivity. Additionally, this researcher extracted rich, thick descriptions to increase internal and external validity and reliability of the study.

**Data analysis.** Notes were coded to further inform the themes that emerged from the conversations on teacher resiliency. Field notes, as well as reflective notes in the researcher’s journal, were reviewed within 24 hours of conducting the interviews and focus group to allow for immediate data recollection. All notes were coded and synthesized to add to the research and check for congruence between the interviews and focus group.
Stages of Data Collection

Table 1 lists the steps of data collection and when they were conducted.

Table 1

Data Collection Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Dates</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Development of Research Proposal</td>
<td>Aug. 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral Committee Review and Revisions</td>
<td>Jan. 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRB Certification-Drexel University</td>
<td>Mar. 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invitation and consent process with participants</td>
<td>Mar. 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>Mar.–Apr. 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group</td>
<td>Apr. 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete transcriptions of data</td>
<td>Apr.–May 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begin horizontal analysis</td>
<td>Apr.–May 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify themes</td>
<td>May–June 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craft findings</td>
<td>June–July 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draft Chapter 4 (plan on 3 revisions)</td>
<td>July–Sept. 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submission and defense of dissertation</td>
<td>Jan. 2015</td>
</tr>
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Ethical Considerations

The TRUSD superintendent first needed to give approval at which time the application to the Drexel IRB and subsequent approval from the IRB were completed. Further, this study’s recruitment and consent process provides complete disclosure of the study’s purpose, describes the importance of confidentiality, and employs the use of pseudonyms for teachers and any student references. The participants were informed that they could decide to withdraw from the study at any time upon their request. All data
collection methods provided complete anonymity and consent forms were completed prior to the participation in the interviews.

Neither the results of this study nor the transcriptions included any teacher or student names; only pseudonyms are used to protect their identities. Further, all recordings and data that were coded during the data analysis have only pseudonyms of any person mentioned and are maintained in a locked cabinet in the Principal Investigator’s office for a minimal period of three years.
Chapter 4: Findings, Results, and Interpretations

**Introduction**

In this chapter, the researcher’s findings, results, and interpretations are presented. This chapter begins with a review of the purpose of the study and the research questions and provides a summation of participant information. A representation of the findings that emerged from analysis of field research is presented. The findings are supported with thick, rich descriptions from direct commentary drawn from the participants regarding their lived experiences as well as the researcher’s observations and field notes. The results of the study are provided and then interpreted in relation to the theory, research, and practice reviewed in Chapter 2. Chapter 4 concludes with an overview of the content presented and summation of key points.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the phenomenon of resiliency through the lived experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of long-tenured special education teachers in TRUSD.

**Research Questions**

The following are the research questions that guided this phenomenological study:

1. What is the nature or essence of the experience of teaching special education for many years?

2. How do special education teachers describe what compels them to stay in the special education classroom?
3. How do long-tenured special education teachers understand and perceive the nature of their resiliency?

Participant Descriptions

The participants of this phenomenological study included 19 credentialed special education teachers with 10 or more years of experience without breaks in employment in the TRUSD (and one of the four former districts consolidated to become TRUSD). These participants taught in special education settings at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

Participants were invited to participate via an email sent to all eligible teachers and self-identified on a first-come, first-included basis. The first 12 volunteers participated in an in-depth, semi-structured interview; the next seven participants participated in a focus group. To maintain anonymity and mask the participants’ identities, pseudonyms have been used to identify each participant.

Summary descriptions of the 19 participants are found in Table 2. Of the 19 participants, six taught at an elementary school, five taught at a junior high or middle school, and eight taught at the high school level in special education classrooms. Special education is broken into two categories of disabilities: mild/moderate and moderate/severe. Teachers who teach mild/moderate generally work with students who spend a majority of their day in a general education classroom but also receive specialized academic instruction in a resource room or in a self-contained classroom. Thirteen of the 19 participants worked with mild/moderate students, nine were resource specialists (RSP), and four worked in a self-contained or special day class (SDC). The students with whom they worked included students with learning disabilities,
communication disorders, and emotional or behavioral disorders and may include intellectual disabilities, high functioning autism, or disabilities caused by traumatic brain injury. Six of the 19 participants taught moderate/severe in a special day class. Teachers who teach moderate/severe generally work with students whose difficulties require functional academics and life skills instruction. The students with whom they worked may have intellectual disabilities, autism, other health impairments, multiple disabilities, or severe effects caused by traumatic brain injury. Often this population is taught in a self-contained classroom or special day class (SDC), but, where appropriate, they are included in general education (Brigham Young University, 2014). Of the 19 participants, 17 were Caucasian and two were African American. The participants’ tenure in role ranged from 10 years to 40 years. This information is provided in general to assure confidentiality to the participants (see Table 2).
Table 2

Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonyms</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Special Education Setting</th>
<th>Teacher Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Mild/Moderate</td>
<td>RSP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynn</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Mild/Moderate</td>
<td>RSP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Moderate/Severe</td>
<td>SDC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beverly</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Moderate/Severe</td>
<td>SDC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daisy</td>
<td>Junior High</td>
<td>Mild/Moderate</td>
<td>RSP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>Junior High</td>
<td>Mild/Moderate</td>
<td>RSP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>Junior High</td>
<td>Mild/Moderate</td>
<td>RSP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Mild/Moderate</td>
<td>SDC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Mild/Moderate</td>
<td>RSP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Mild/Moderate</td>
<td>RSP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Moderate/Severe</td>
<td>SDC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irene</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Moderate/Severe</td>
<td>SDC</td>
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<tr>
<th>Focus Group</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
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<td>SDC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Mild/Moderate</td>
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<td>Mariah</td>
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<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
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<td>Mild/Moderate</td>
<td>RSP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pam</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Mild/Moderate</td>
<td>SDC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Moderate/Severe</td>
<td>SDC</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Findings

Moustakas (1994) indicated, “with examining entities from many sides, angles and perspectives…the essence of a phenomenon or experience is achieved” (p. 58). The findings presented in this chapter emerge from the analysis of the descriptions of the lived experiences, attitudes, and perceptions shared by 19 long-tenured special education
teachers in the TRUSD whose behavior reflected the phenomenon of resiliency. Five major themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) personal characteristics, (b) all about the kids, (c) positive relationships, (d) negative challenges, and (e) teacher tenure. Figure 5 offers a graphic representation of the findings and related themes.

**Figure 5.** Findings and themes of the study.
Personal Characteristics

Study participants described personal characteristics and traits they observed within themselves that made them successful and resilient special education teachers. The shared characteristics included: (a) an ability to not internalize, (b) previous work outside of special education, (c) personal connections, (d) separation of work and personal lives, and (e) a passion and excitement for the job.

Ability to not internalize. Fourteen of the 19 special education teachers (75%) in this study described the importance of “not taking things personally.” These participants discussed developing this ability to overcome the challenges they faced with peers, administration, and the students they served. Personal attitude was discussed as an important factor in their resiliency. Eric spoke about having “the right attitude about the things that happened.”

A lot of times it has nothing to do with you, it's just displaced anger. If you can just maintain, just not taking things personal, and just kind of keeping your calm to make the other kids calm in the classroom. I think that goes a long way, and shit just goes wrong; your shit is not going to go right all the time.

Faith described an experience with a former student early in her career and suggested this experience was a determining factor in her ability to not take things personally. She spoke passionately about a student, remembering the student’s name and describing the interaction as if it had just occurred.

Kelsey [a pseudonym] taught me that she, when she would throw those F- Bombs at me, it was like throwing a rock and hitting me. And I’ve learned that it’s not thrown at me, but it’s thrown because they don’t know what else to do but throw it! So I try to catch it, and figure it out. You know, I don’t take it personal.

According to Beverly, taking things personally is one of the biggest mistakes new teachers make. She described her ability to find things outside of work to keep her in the
right state of mind with the right attitude. When asked what advice she would give to a new special education teacher, she responded:

You’ve got to find, something that gets you out of that work thing or whatever; where you can just let it go. (Um) If you don’t have that, I think the teachers, especially new teachers, are just going to internalize what the kids say, and a lot of what the parents say, and you do start to take it personally.

Study participants discussed that not internalizing interactions was important with students and parents and also with administration. Twelve of 19 participants (64%) noted their administrator’s opinion had a significant impact on their personal job satisfaction. Jessica described this phenomenon stating that the administration “recognizing that I had the patience, and kind of the creativity to work with [the] Special Ed population, I think that really drove me and pushed me.” Irene, teaching special education since 1969, commented, “I don’t pay attention to somebody who takes a quick five minute tour through the school and lays down the curriculum. I do what I feel is best for the kids.” Eric described it as “mostly it is an attitude.”

It’s attitude about the things that go on. And if you take things personal, you aren't going to last. You’ve got to be able to maintain that sense of disconnect. … It has to be about what they [the students] are going through and why those behaviors are coming out. And kids are just, when they curse you out and say you're a “fucking asshole” and your all this, you know what I mean, it just doesn’t bother me. It just goes in one ear and out the other, and I kind of just don't take it. I don't internalize it. I guess that's what it is.

**Previous work outside of special education fosters a commitment.** Twelve study participants (64%) revealed that special education teaching was not their first professional career and that they had been dissatisfied with their prior careers. Some suggested that having careers before becoming a teacher helped them be more resilient. Grace epitomized this when she said, “the grass is not greener on the other side.” In
particular, participants commonly reported that not liking their previous career and longing to work with children were two of the factors that led them into special education. Matt described transitioning from a career in law enforcement:

I was working as a police officer at Long Beach State and I always wanted to do something different. And I had been doing soccer for my son and everyone was just all “Hey man. You. Kids listen to you but they don’t listen to nobody else but they listen to you for some reason. You should be a teacher.” And I was looking for a transition and so here I am.

Alice had previously worked with special needs children in a group home and after a first career as an occupational therapy assistant.

I decided to become an Occupational Therapy Assistant and so I went to school in Sac City for that, and became one. And did that for several years. But, what I missed was working with a population of kids with special needs, which I worked with in the group home.

Eric was very vocal about his personal disdain for working outside of education. As he spoke, his eyes were expressive when he described his discomfort with his prior career in technology.

I graduated from college with a business degree. Worked for Apple for about three months, hated it! … Because I played pro basketball, I was interviewing to be an athletic director and a coach at a private school. Which was kind of in education. And my best friend’s mom heard about it and came over to my house and told me why I should be a Special Educator … When I went to work with Apple I couldn't stand being in a cubicle, not dealing with and working with people.

Study participants pointed out that their choice to go into special education emerged after a great deal of thought and effort. When referring to their longevity teaching special education, they often referred back to prior career experiences outside of education as being a factor in their decision to stay in the classroom.

I mean this wasn’t my first job I didn’t get out of high school go to college and become a teacher. Um I had a lot of other professions before I became a teacher,
I’ve done hair, I worked in restaurants, I’ve been an insurance agent. I’ve done it. I’ve been an office manager, done a lot of different things so a lot of thought went into going back to college and becoming a teacher. For me, so it wasn’t my first thing so I was probably more committed then the average person who has not had any other experiences out there, you know I knew that the grass was not greener on the other side … But you know that and I really think that it’s not being the only job that I’ve ever had that really helped a lot too. (Grace)

**Personal connections.** Over half the participants had personal connections that fostered their interest in working with a population that had learning disabilities. Three of the 19 participants had direct, family connections with the learning disabled population. Mariah described her experience:

Well, when my son was born he had, um, otitis medial, so he couldn’t hear. So I began taking sign language, and I thought I wanted to be a teacher of the deaf. And I realized that the deaf don’t really like hearing people; so the culture is really closed off. So (um) I had to do a work experience thing with a school, and so I worked in a home that had adults that were deaf and they were intellectually disabled as well; and I fell in love with the population … and I decided that that’s what I wanted to do.

Mark talked about an experience with his stepson that opened his eyes to a potential career in special education. “I have a stepson who has Downs. I had never been in his classroom. I went into his classroom, saw what they were doing, fell in love and started teaching.” Other participants described growing up with family members who worked in special education or had friends who had special needs. Lynn shared, “I grew up with a friend who is deaf and I became an interpreter for the deaf.”

Grace’s father was a special education teacher. In her interview, she described the influence he had on her career as her mentor. As she discussed her childhood experience, she was enthusiastic and animated:

I grew up with it. My dad was a special education teacher. … at Grant special education center that opened up in 1969. I was 5 years old, and my dad was one of the original teachers. (uh) So I grew up hanging out there a lot. Also when I
was a kid too, two close friends of mine had disabilities, one was a younger sister of a deaf friend and the other was one of my class friends, so I just kind of grew up around people with disabilities … It is just, I mean, when I was a kid it was just fun, you know its like we get there and you know everyone is just cool and I’d go swimming and I did a whole bunch of fun stuff with them.

Eric spoke about his own challenges of being a child growing up with ADHD. He described how his personal experiences helped him make connections and relate to the special education students in his classroom.

Because, I was a Special Ed kid. So, it doesn't bother me as much. I am way more resilient. I think, with these kids. People say, “how do you do that with these kids.” I think it's because what I went through [in] school. There was no such thing as a 504 plan or any of that.

I was just extremely ADHD and I didn't fit in school, so I was constantly in trouble, constantly in detention. I was a bad kid; you know you get that idea that you're no good, that you are a bad kid. (Hmm) So, when I look at these kids it doesn't bother as much their behaviors. I'm able to go past it, and I remember I used to behave like that. … I was such a bad kid because I was testing the rules. Because of a lot of other shit that was going on or whatever.

So I think just maybe. Maybe I just make a better connection. Because of what I'm talking about, I think they know that I know, what they are doing or why they are going through this because I was going through the same shit.

Five study participants (26%) revealed they had a personal investment and connection to the community where they taught. They (and their families) were part of the community. Examples of this included participants who lived in the neighborhood of their school, whose children have attended schools in the district, and those involved outside of education in the community.

Helen described her personal connections in the community:

I live here in the community, so and, and the kids, you know my kids go to school here, so I know a lot of the parents, I know a lot of the community members, I just think if I’m going to invest that much time and energy, I want to be a part of the community, as well as part of the school.
Laughing with a big smile, Helen shared, “they can bury me right outside in the hallway if they want to.” Helen’s husband also works for the district. Similar to Helen, Daisy also lives in the community and her husband is a retired teacher and administrator from the district. Finally, Beverly noted, “I have a vested interest here, and I live in the Twin Rivers Unified School District.” While several participants did not live in the community, some referred to past experiences of being involved in the community by coaching a swim team or other extracurricular activities at their school sites. A trend among study participants was they had a vested interest with the learning disabled population as well as a personal commitment to the communities that are part of the TRUSD.

**Separation of work and personal life.** One hundred percent (100%) of the interview participants reported that being resilient required a clear and distinct separation between what occurred at work and what one does in one’s personal life. Some participants described times when they did not follow this advice and became overwhelmed with work to the point of feeling burnt out. As Beverly described, “The reality is that if we get burnt out we’re not good for anybody.” Regarding advice for a new special education teacher, Faith responded, “the advice I would give is to take care of yourself, make sure you get lots of sleep, make sure you don’t become all consumed, try to workout, and have a good diet.” Faith also described how she used to take work home with her. She spoke about her husband (who died this past year) who helped her learn to separate work and home life.

(Laugh) … I used to bring a lot of stuff home with me, and I would, you know, I would open the garage door get out and I’d have papers and books and all this and that. And my husband used to say, “don’t even think about it,” he wouldn’t even
let me bring stuff in the house, he’d say “I’m drawing the line, you can’t, I’m drawing it,” and that’s, that’s what did it. … he said [that] “is not going to happen.

Kim simply advised teachers to “leave your job at your job.”

Participants also described the importance of having breaks in the year as being a factor in their longevity and resiliency. Whether it was a weekend or summer break, study participants described looking forward to them.

So, the resiliency the part to hang on and to do is, is just that you know sometimes, it’s just like “Okay, I have a break coming up.” So that can keep me resilient. You know sometimes I go to the grocery store one afternoon and I’m going “Oh I have the week off.” And she goes “Ugh, don’t tell me that.” And so I think that one of the jokes is that one of the best things about teaching is June, July and August. When it was June, July and August. You know the breaks, we have, you know that really gives you the chance to breathe and so when you start to feel whelmed it can help you keep coming back. (Daisy)

Chris elaborated on his experience of separating work from home life by referring to home life as “down time.” During his interview, Chris suggested that down time was one of the most important aspects to his resiliency in his long and successful career.

Learning to pace myself. Really very, very important knowing when to stop. Knowing when to sleep in. Knowing when to forget it, let it go. The down time, learning to appreciate the down time. Really that's very, very important. Learning to appreciate down time. Not being afraid. Knowing, knowing that being aware of the first day of school and the last day of school it's work. But, knowing when to say no and I need to back off I need to forget about what I'm doing and doing something completely different. Exercise such as yoga, reading, TV, anything outside of it. Outside of the district, or the job, or the career.

**Exercise, hobbies, and passions.** Study participants were clear on the importance they assigned to activities outside of the work place to maintain balance in their complex professional lives. Several participants spoke about the importance of exercising, finding a hobby, and fulfilling their passions outside of work. Participants repeatedly noted they would not be able to maintain their professional resiliency without having an activity to
help relieve stress and recharge them, mentally and physically. Beverly, who early in her career faced many challenges, ranging from a lack of administrative support to, as she self described, nearly burning out, spoke about the advice she was given by her psychologist.

One of the best things one of my psychologists said to me was to change my exercise routine and to do at least 30 minutes before I left the school site. Whether I walked or did my Pilates ball or my weights or whatever, do it at school and just let it go there and then. If I came home and wanted to do more exercises or go for a walk or whatever I could. I wouldn’t have all of the weight of my day on me then, and that was very helpful advice, doing that exercise just before I leave the site. That physical kind of getting it out made me stop and say “that really upset me today!” That really … helped me be resilient.

Beverly was a strong advocate for fulfilling one’s passions. She described her passion for art, reading, and four-wheel driving—noting they were “calming and soothing.” She suggested, “you got to find something that gets you out of the work thing, or whatever, where you can just let go.” Later in the interview, when asked about what she saw in other special education teachers who were resilient, she shared, “they generally have something outside of their family or outside of school that is for them where they can kind of rebuild, you know that internal mechanism that makes you keep going.”

Similar to other participants who described the importance of physical activity, Chris talked about how he did yoga to refocus and rejuvenate himself. Eric, who previously played professional basketball, discussed how he used sports outside of work to stay competitive and relieve his personal frustrations and stress.

Athletics! Staying physical outside of class. I still play a lot of basketball tournaments, still play city league twice a week with friends and get to run into people and knock them down and hard. And its legal, it’s a good way to get out your frustrations. Being able to run into people like when we play football and when I play soccer and basketball. And you can foul people really hard in sports
if you know what you're doing and you can really compete. It's a good way to get out the frustration, that stress.

Study participants also stressed the importance of being present, living in the moment, and not dwelling on what occurred at work or what they had to do the following workday. A common theme among participants was to let go of work and stay focused on their personal lives to maintain their resiliency. Faith presented her strategy for being present speaking confidently about the importance of this practice with enthusiasm.

When I’m home, I’m home! And I’ve learned that a long time ago from my husband. When I’m home I do what I like to do at home, whether it’s cooking or shopping, or you know, doing whatever I want to do. And I, I think about what I do, and I, I as an educator, I really work hard at being home or being away from work, um, I don’t bring it home, um, I just don’t, otherwise it just takes over.

Some participants described times when they were faced with difficulty letting go of challenges at work.

Occasionally I get so caught up in what I’m doing, it gets sometimes overwhelming and I get home on the weekends and I just want to lay on the couch with a blanket, and not get up, and not talk to anybody, but I found that it just makes things worse. It’s like you really need to have things you look forward to outside of work, so that if work goes really crappy one week there’s something really cool on the weekend to help you to recharge. (Grace)

Despite the challenges and stresses that special education teachers face, outside activities like exercise, hobbies, and fulfilling one’s passions was a common theme shared by resilient special education teachers. Participants repeatedly acknowledged the importance of having friends and family outside of work as a support system. Jessica identified her family as well as activities outside of work as factors in her resilience as a special education teacher.

Just honestly, having people to talk to about whatever. Just having really good friends that give good advice. So just listen. And I have a great family support group, um and just different things like going on a walk, going on a bike ride, just
staying active, doing fun things, just different activities, being involved in family activities is a good distraction to make me feel normal.

Study participants identified having personal balance and life outside work as having a direct impact on their resiliency as well as on their physical and emotional health and well-being. All interview participants spoke about the importance of balancing life and work and separating what occurred in the classroom and at the school site from what occurred at home in their personal lives.

**A passion and excitement for the job.** Seven study participants (37%) described that although the job can at times feel overwhelming and isolating, they enjoyed the challenge of the job, finding it exciting to work with special need students. Describing herself as a lifelong learner who wanted to be better prepared to meet the needs of this diverse population, Lynn commented, “I'm one of those people who considers themselves a lifetime learner. I just want to keep learning even if it is towards the end of my career.”

Other participants specifically appreciated that within TRUSD, there are many opportunities to continue to professionally develop themselves. According to Kim, “I like Twin Rivers because they give us a lot of professional development and I have grown as a teacher and I like that.” Long-tenured study participants described their ongoing commitment to learning and their desire to be the best they could be in order to better meet the needs of their students.

One of the things I did is, you know, through what is my learning plan they are always offering different trainings in the district, I mean it’s like every month or so, I truly try to take as many of those as possible, part of it is just because I want to learn these things. (Grace)
Study participants also reflected upon the time they put into learning in order to better be prepared to teach their students. Kim described her excitement with learning along with her students.

For me, ah, since I'm first a teacher, I'm also learning along with the kids. You know, I have to go and read two books this weekend so I can support them. I would say, I'm still learning classroom management, so I’m open to go to training and be a lifelong learner. Learning new things.

Many of these long-tenured special education teachers enthusiastically described how they personally enjoyed the challenges they faced in dealing with the complexities of the job.

I like the challenge, I really like the challenge, I look at it as a challenge, um, it’s not boring, um I have no clue what the kids are going to be like this year, I have no idea (smiling), and I like that, because people say, isn’t it time for you to retire? Why would I, why would I retire, why would I, I don’t know, I like what I do. (Faith)

More than half the study participants talked about how they appreciated that their job was never boring and generally exciting. Although the excitement can mean dramatic challenges, they appreciated that every day was different and it kept them on their toes, as every student is different with the complexities he or she brings. Mark exemplified this in his description of what kept him in this job.

(Uh) my job is an exciting job. (Uh) nothing is stagnant. Nothing is the same. It’s never redundant. (Uh) it’s always something fresh and that is what I like about it. I mean, I mean I like it and I get along and I do like it, but just the fact that it is always changing, it’s very exciting for me. So that’s what keeps me here. It’s not boring.

Eric similarly highlighted, “It's never dull and it seems to be worthwhile so it … you have to get up and do something in the morning. It seems to be a worthwhile job … Yea, spontaneity … It is an adventure every day.” Faith declared, “I’m never bored. I like to
be busy and I don’t want to sit in front of a computer all day, I enjoy kids, and I just, I’m really never bored.”

Alice appreciated, “you get to be creative, you have to sort of be a problem solver and think creatively outside of the box.” Like others in this study, she referred to herself as a lifelong learner who gets to “learn something new that sometimes you get very frustrated and you are working very hard and it is not working so you just have to figure out another way. So there is always another opportunity to learn something new.” She went on to say, “I like it, I’m always learning new things and always problem solving and I like problem solving. And I’m learning along with the kids the new technology” (Kim).

Jessica described her need to stay challenged, “I like the challenges, and this is a really huge challenge, so sticking with it is part of my whole mental game, making sure I stay challenged.” As she spoke, her eyes lit up and you could tell this was important to her.

You might just see one kid out of 200 that you’ve worked with that come out and you’re like “oh my gosh, that kid, I supported that kid” and you see them later on and they thank you or you get a message from them in some capacity and it makes you feel like you did something good in the world.

**Summary.** Personal characteristics related to the phenomenon of being resilient emerged across the 12 interviews and the focus group conversation with the seven long-tenured special education teachers. Characteristics included (a) the ability to not take things personally or internalize challenging experiences, (b) the value of having prior career experiences outside of special education, (c) personal connections to the special
education population, (d) the ability to balance work and their personal lives, and (e) a continuing passion and excitement for the job.

**All About the Kids**

One hundred percent (100%) of the participants revealed that their greatest motivation centered on their love and care for the special education population of students. During the focus group, participants resoundingly and enthusiastically responded, “it’s all about the kids!” Everyone in the focus group was nodding his or her head in unanimous agreement. Their conversation focused on two themes that supported this finding: (a) an ethic of care for the special education population and (b) the positive experience of working with special needs kids.

**An ethic of care for the special education population.** Participants described showing up to work each day because of their love for the students, particularly for those with disabilities. Carol commented:

I want to go to work, I want to wake up, I’m all excited about it; (um) and then I know I get the summer because we get that little break and we, well that’s a big motivation (laugh); but I like to be with the kids, I really do like that

Lynn described what kept her in her special education teaching role:

Again, I love kids, (I just) the paperwork is ridiculous, but I love working with the kids. I like how you can have fun with them; you can get them to learn, even though they are having troubles in their own classroom. So that's why I'm there.

Participants spoke passionately about particular students expressing how much they cared about their students. Beverly spoke about a time early in her career when she was having difficulty at her school site with peers and administration. She discussed how even when she was facing personal adversity it was her responsibility for the students that fostered her resilience.
Those kids were phenomenal, they wanted to learn so bad and they were making extraordinary progress with me, that I thought, “I can’t leave them, I can’t leave my babies,” you know, they are just blossoming and growing and becoming these incredible young people. That kept me there, even though the circumstances and the school, and the stuff from the other people was horrible, it was just awful.

Chris described having a concern for those who were mistreated or did not have a voice as being one of the biggest motivators for his calling to the special education profession.

Hmm, it was so long ago. I was geez … Compassion and ah, concern for the underdog. It was my father who put a lot of emphasis on treating people that are not treated well to be treated well. He used to say “the underdog.” So I aspired to do that.

Chris commented without hesitation that it was “empathy, a high degree of empathy for the students” that led to his resilience as a special education teacher. Similarly, Irene described her motivation for staying in the field, exclaiming, “I feel our population … they’re getting shafted too many times, so that’s why I keep staying here!” Mirroring Irene’s and Chris’s passion for their students and speaking from the heart, Daisy shared, “I had the experience, I had a love for the kids. I had you know the joy of it … It was just a love of teaching. Teaching kids the basic skills they needed to have.” Helen spoke with passion noting, “Um, it’s always been the kids, I mean they’re, they’re ever-changing, I mean, they’re like snowflakes. No two kids are ever, ever, ever the same.”

Grace’s representation of her work with her students depicts how the desire to make a difference and impact a student’s life often frames a teacher’s purpose.

I have students who are between the age of 18 and 22. They tend to be the ones who have fallen through the cracks their entire lives. (Um) I think most of them have the potential to be so much more independent then they are, and I think independence is really the key for them. (Um) I kind of made it my mission to try to find where their potential lies, I mean think about being dependent on other people for everything the rest of your life. I mean not being able to make food for yourself, do your own hygiene, get to the doctor when you need it. A lot of my
students tend to not have any social outlets outside of school; so that when the little yellow bus stops coming think about no friends and no social interaction for the rest of your life, or being able to have a job, or being in control of your spending money, I mean unless it’s absolutely necessary, I mean of course there’s always going to those, you know those medically fragile people where they just don’t have control over things, but I mean if you could have any control whatsoever all that gives you so much more dignity in life and I really think everyone deserves that! So kind of being able to help people even it’s just one step in that direction, it just feels good!

The long-tenured special education teachers described how they acted from an ethic of care, showing empathy and love for this population in their interactions with students and how it is from this that their resilience emerges— from the joy they took in seeing each student make strides large and small.

**The positive experience of working with special needs kids.** Having a focus on the positive was one of the factors participants described that enabled them to be resilient. Even when teachers described feeling like they had the odds stacked against them, they were able to focus on wins both in and out of the classroom.

There’s another thing that when you say ‘what keeps you in special ed.’ and you know, I get to see these kids have wins everyday, ok, even if I have a kid that melts down 3 times, 4 times he’s able to pull it back together, he’s getting on the bus, he’s walking on the bus, skipping off because he’s happy the school day has ended, you get to see a win. (Nick)

Nick further explained that in the special education classroom, “there’s a ton of heartbreak,” but he was able to focus on the singular successes of his students noting, “one carries you through a whole garbage can of the other stuff.” This ability to focus on the children’s success appears to be a key ingredient for resilience. As Beverly echoed:

Those little glimmers of the kids, you know, there’s always one who’s making a big progress, and well relatively big progress, in reading or something and celebrating those and celebrating the kids for that reason really helps in that resiliency too. Gives you that, I don’t know, “Atta girl” or whatever to keep on going.
When asked what advice she would give to a new special education teacher entering the field, Beverly responded:

Just love what you’re doing, and enjoy your successes, and don’t become frustrated with what the impossible job brings you. And I don’t know that I would call it an impossible job at that point. And for most people who are just starting out into special education, they’ve got stars in their eyes and it’s going to work anyway. But to continue to keep those stars and continue to shine instead of tarnish, enjoy the successes.

Twenty-six percent (five) of the participants explained how they specifically used humor with their support network as a way to reframe challenges and see in them in a positive light.

Probably, laughing (audible long laugh), laughing and humor you know. I take up a story and call my support and say “you wouldn’t believe what happened today” and I always make it a little goofier and not as quite as serious at maybe it was, and laugh about it. And even with the kids I’ll stop in the middle of a lesson and go, “oh we just totally messed this up and I messed this up” and try to laugh and find that level with the children. And when I’m communicating with parents I try to give a little strength and a little funny story about their kids because I think we need to go there, so that makes me really resilient. (Beverly)

Like Beverly, Eric described the importance of reframing challenges with friends as important to staying positive.

And you got to have the attitude that you got to be able to use humor … you have to use humor. Other wise you will cry. So, you have to be able to laugh about things you know. And I think it also helps to have good friends for good outlets.

During the interviews, three participants also identified that they often encountered faculty who complained about problems and who seemed unhappy in their work. They described avoiding these individuals as well as workplace gossip and suggested that this fosters their resilience.

Sometimes I think that, sometimes I go to those meetings and it’s like I’m tired of all the complaining and it sounds like just a gripe session sometimes. And its like, do something about it, quit, retire; you know there’s certain people that it’s
like I only have three years left, or I only have six months left, well it’s like, be done now, if it’s that terrible, be done! But there’s other people who love what they’re doing and I try to sit with those people. (Lynn)

Faith spoke adamantly, raising her voice and straightening her posture as she described her experience with certain staff:

I hear a lot of negative stuff, but I don’t go negative; to me negative never solves a problem; if the teachers start to go negative, I leave, I just don’t buy it, I, if someone is not happy in their job why the heck stick around?

To become a long-tenured special education teacher, Faith asserted, “You have to be in it for the right reasons, otherwise, you will not be able to overcome the challenges associated with the job.” She went on to say:

Education is unique and no one can teach you how to teach, it’s a process, it and you either kind of able to take the day off and fail, take tomorrow and try harder, better, or think of something different, you know it’s a fabulous job because you have that freedom but not everybody can handle that, it takes, you know, you got to look deep down.

Faith further explained that in her view, “teachers that have made it through the long haul, there’s quite a few, there really are, I think it’s their positive attitude.”

Repeatedly, having a positive attitude was identified as a contributor to resiliency. Grace referred to herself as being “an eternal optimist” numerous times in her interview. Her body language and non-verbal communication exemplified this as she smiled throughout and passionately made hand gestures as she reflected upon her experiences.

I’m just an eternal optimist! Its just (ah, you know) I wake up and I could walk outside and see utter destruction and still think it’s going to be a good day. You know I think that’s just part of my make up. And I think that helps a lot.

**Summary.** All 19 study participants (100%) did what they did because of the love that they had for the students. Participants described specific stories relating how the opportunity to see the students’ progress helped them overcome the challenges
associated with their jobs. Study participants identified that personal optimism and a positive attitude supported their resiliency. Participants described not just a love for children but, specifically, a love and empathy for kids with special needs.

**Positive Relationships**

Participants reported that one of the most significant factors that led to their resilience was the relationships they built with others in the work setting. As Jessica noted, “We are in this together … so I think it’s just that familial aspect.” Periods when they were not strongly connected with others were described as difficult and led to decisions to transfer school sites. Positive support was described in three themes: (a) connections and support with the general and special education community, (b) mentors and partners, and (c) positive administration support.

**Connections with general and special education peers.** The value of peer relationships was a common theme described by all participants interviewed as well as a topic in the dialogue of the focus group participants.

**Connections at the beginning of the career.** Beverly described how a dearth of connections affected her:

My first three years were awful, awful, awful. And there was no support from General Ed when I was trying to mainstream kids and everything, and then finally a new General Ed teacher moved in and she and I became really good friends and we kind of supported each other. It was hard those first three years.

While each participant described the challenges they experienced as a special education teacher, many shared that it was the relationships they developed with the general and special education staff with whom they worked that kept them in both position and school. Chris noted that what is important “is relationships … Develop[ing]
a small network of friendships with staff.” Faith described it was “relationships that keep me here.”

I think it’s the connections I’ve made with people (um) right from the very beginning. I, (ah) was pretty open on how I accept things; about how I make an effort to make connections with people I meet … I’m happy, so I’ve made good connections; … I just feel accepted … To me it’s relationships that keep me here. (Faith)

Study participants identified the importance of creating a social climate with other teachers. Three study participants specifically described special education as being an isolating and lonely position. When asked what advice they would give to a new special education teacher, their responses centered on the need to get out of the classroom, connect, and talk with others.

As soon as I got to the school I’d be looking for someone that I really clicked with that I could go to for advice, or for venting or for knocking around advice or for laughing or for going out for a soda or for coffee after school or whatever…where you’re just not locked in your room … Because it can be a very isolating profession in ways, because you’re in your room sometimes six hours a day, you just don’t get out for lunch or recess or things like that; and pretty soon that becomes your whole world and it cannot be. And these new teachers who do not know anybody, they really are going to have to go and find that one person who that’s all you need, is sometime that one person you go ahead and click with, who you can go and sit after school and talk with, who you have lunch with. (Beverly)

**Peer support.** Study participants described the importance of peer support to help manage their daily challenges. While each respondent had a particular personal experience with making connections with others, each indicated connections with general education and special education peers were vital to both their personal resiliency and success as an educator. Alice spoke to the importance of other special education teachers:

We rely on each other a lot. That is a lot of my support. And we talk, everyone works in a group. And I think it would be really hard if you were all on your own
in this school. And you were the only Special Ed teacher. I think that would be really hard and I wouldn't like it. So I really count on my other teachers.

Study participants shared that knowing they were not alone fostered their resilience. As Daisy noted:

Yeah, the resilience that I see of other teachers and having that monthly RSP meeting you get to see that. You see their frustration with the impossible job, you see their dealings with the impossible job, you see their love of what they do; and they wouldn’t do anything else if they could, so they stay and they do and (um) that you know they’re there, they’re there for the long haul and that’s been really, really nice.

Grace wanted to see more of this occur, where teachers were simply able to get together to talk.

I would love to see a place where, even virtually, special education teachers deal with certain areas, whether it is transition, or whether RSP; where we get together once a month and just talk with other people who are going through the same thing. I think that would be really beneficial … Whether it is trainings or whatever, meeting other teachers and talking to them, talking about what we do. Um I don’t know it just kind of makes me feel more connected to the district as a whole if, even if it doesn’t make a difference, it’s just going out and letting other people know who we are and what we’re doing there.

Connections with para-educators. Para-educators are paraprofessional employees who support the special education classroom and with whom these teachers spend a majority of their day. For many participants, the para-educator was described as either one of their greatest supports or one of the biggest challenges they were facing.

One participant glowingly described her para-educator:

The gods sent me the most amazing paraprofessional on the face of the earth. Uh, she’s an RSP (Resource Specialist) parent herself. She lives in the community. (um) I mean it’s, it’s, it’s kind of eerie, we should almost be married, we finish each other’s sentences. (um) My program doesn’t work without her and I’ve seen it. I went two and half years without having a para-educator, and then she came along and I just thought I’d died and gone to heaven. It makes all the difference in the world. (Helen)
For another participant, however, the para-educator was one of her greatest challenges.

Visually frustrated, Lynn reported:

The other part is planning for a para-educator who is not strong enough to be in this program. I don’t think, ya know, a lot of them want to make copies or as you saw she was not needed somewhere and she came in here and sat, and I asked her to do something, she said I’m on my break, so she didn’t have anything to do in another classroom, so she took a break and during her break time she is taking a break and it’s like God, do your job. (audible laugh)

Although, para-educators are often discounted in the education community, their participation in the special education classroom, according to two participants, seems to be a major influence in their own success or one of the greatest challenges.

**Mentors and teaching partners.** When asked specifically about what participants observe about teachers who stay, Beverly shared, “They all have a mentor teacher they work with, or partner teachers they work with.” Others described the impact experienced and respected mentors had on their teaching practice. Lynn shared that in her 20-plus years’ experience in the district, “I was lucky enough to have the mentors that I had, that really helped me [in] becoming the teacher that I am today.” A few participants acknowledged that in many ways it was mentors who helped them early on and throughout their careers. They described these essential relationships as enabling them and offering an avenue of direction and support. When asked what advice participants would give to new special education teachers, a common response was about the importance of developing relationships with experienced staff to learn from their expertise and develop a support system for the challenges they face.

Beyond current teaching partners, study participants described that while many of the mentors they worked with early on in their careers have retired, they continue to seek
their expertise and advice. They noted that these individuals offered a safe space where they can confide their frustrations and not be critiqued in an evaluative manner.

I would say that my current teaching partners are a huge support, just bouncing things off of them; (um) taking each other’s students if we need to, someone to vent to. And then my former partners who have retired are the biggest support for me because they really understand. But they are out of it, so it’s kind of like a different thing so when I come and say, “Oh, I, this child did this, or this child did this.” They maybe have a story from about 20 years ago that trumps mine or is at least equal and I could put it in perspective and go, “ok I can go back another day.” Yah those retired friends, I think were super good support and now that they retire they are kind of like there for me and text me “how are you doing, do you need anything? (Beverly)

Eric reminisced about his relationships with his mentors, describing the attitude and mindset his mentor helped him mold.

I know that a lot of teachers get frustrated because you really can't influence the success of students, as you would like. Sometimes you have to be just happy with your effort and know you gave the best effort. And if a kid decides to fail there is really nothing you can do. The first people I have that mentored me really set me up in that mindset. That when kids fail it's not always going to be on me. So I didn't have to take all that home. So, I was able to survive in the position without burning out.

Helen described the importance of being supported by others as being “the biggest thing” to help with success. As a mentor teacher for years in the BTSA (Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment) program, she shared:

You’ve got to support them, you have to, you know from your next-door neighbor or giving them somebody in their subject matter, somebody in their grade level, somebody has to come in and support them. They have to know they are being supported.

All study participants described specific individuals in their careers who impacted their profession.

**Positive administrative support.** Study participants described their relationship with site and district administration as being an important element in the support they
received. Positive administrative support gave participants a sense that they were wanted and that what they did mattered. Mark appreciated that his administration has been supportive in a collaborative manner.

I’ve never had a problem with my school site administrators, in fact I had outstanding school site administrators, and same thing if I get told “no you can’t do this.” Then we find a way to make it happen, you just make it happen. The school site administrators have pulled me in and said, “I need you to help me make this happen, how can we make this happen?” (Mark)

Matt described this phenomenon, commenting that when needing the support of his administration, he was able to easily collaborate with them.

I have felt that what I needed to tell my administrators needs to happen has happened. If its not going our way, we’ll have a one-on-one and I’ll say, “look you want me to be successful I need a, b, c to happen,” and they needed to make it happen. And they make it happen, ah … Ah, yea, absolutely, yea, I’ve been fortunate, I’ve been fortunate to have … I mean at times I’ve been frustrated I’ve said look, you want some outcomes, what ridiculous mandate, if you want, if you really want the outcomes your saying, this needs to happen, and if not don’t hold me accountable for it.

Jessica specifically described how her leaders influenced her.

I think people recognizing the skills in me, like different people, people that were in leadership over me, like not just giving me compliments or something like that; but them recognizing that I had the patience and kind of the creativity to work with Special Ed population. I think that really drove me and pushed me to get my credentials and my Masters and then when you’re kind of in it you just kind of roll with it and even though in the back of your mind you might be like, “I wonder what it would be like to be this or I wonder what it would’ve been like to do this but” … that means a lot to me. That drives me.

Chris echoed this phenomenon, commenting, “My supervisor came up to me with the Principal one day after the second year of teaching … ‘You have a brilliant career ahead of you.’ That really was inspiring.” Daisy further shared:

What makes me resilient? Um I think, the part of … first of all being where I am for nine years and having the support of the Principal, it gives me the leeway to be comfortable even in what you call the impossible job.
Chris similarly described how fortunate he has been to have a supportive administration. He has been at the same site for 19 years.

So you know I've been very fortunate. I've always felt very supported by the staff, by administration the school. I chose to stay one of the things mild, moderate to moderate severe. I could of gone to a mild, moderate program at another school. But, I did not want to leave my school, and I'm really glad that I did not. I want to retire from my school … I have been very, very fortunate that way. Very, very fortunate.

Helen described having fantastic administrators that allowed her more energy to support the children.

I think that’s (you know) having the great administrators with the exception of one, that (you know), I think that makes it easy to come to your job every day, and do your job, knowing that your administrator has enough trust in you to know you’re going to do the right thing and they’re not going to micromanage every move you make. It makes it a lot easier, you don’t have that extra concern, you can take that one bit of energy and put it on the kids as opposed to worrying always about what they’re going to say, do or wonder about.

Summary. Participants conveyed that positive relationships, such as the connections made with the general and special education community, mentors and partners, and administrative support are key to the positive experiences of study participants and a key factor in the resiliency of special education teachers. One hundred percent of the participants felt that being supported fostered their resilience.

Negative Challenges

Nineteen of 19 (100%) participants described how negative challenges had helped them learn how to be resilient and successful in a challenging field. These negative challenges led them to question staying in the field of special education and their commitment to staying in their current school district. The themes identified related to
(a) time management and organization of IEPs, (b) negative administration, and (c)
district consolidation.

**Time management and organization of IEPs.** Study participants unanimously
reported that among the most challenging aspects of being a special education teacher
was the challenge of managing one’s time and staying organized. Many participants
described past experiences in which they became so overwhelmed by paperwork and the
responsibilities of their job that they nearly burned out. Participants specifically noted
the litigious importance of IEPs and the vast amount of time spent completing them
appropriately and accurately. Lynn reflected upon the increased amount of paperwork
that needs to be done now compared to years ago. “The paperwork, the paperwork, I
spend so many hours at night, at home writing reports and working on IEPs that it’s
ridiculous its not planning my lessons, it’s not getting ready for working with kids.”
Others noted that caseloads of up to 30 students with IEPs needing annual completion for
each student could be overwhelming. Three participants (16%) specifically identified
managing and organizing their calendars as among their greatest challenges.

Irene, a special educator for over 40 years, shared that in her experience special
education has “changed from student oriented to paperwork, procedures, stuff that really
doesn’t deal with the one-on-one pat on the shoulder for the kids.” She often reflected on
her frustration with how the IEP process has changed over the span of her career.

The IEPs, they started out and you would sit with a parent and a sheet of paper,
they would ask questions, we could answer them with a cup of coffee, and you
got to know that way more about the parents then filling out IEPs. Three-fourths
of the parents can’t read and don’t understand them.
Beverly commented on the IEP, “I try to be very thorough in mine and they can take between 6 and 10 hours to write [up] one child.”

While almost all the participants identified paperwork as being a time management and organizational challenge, Chris shared, “I think there is a lot of paperwork that we need to eliminate. But, I understand it … I understand why we have paperwork.” Further, Jessica pointed out that paperwork is going to be a challenge anywhere one works:

Well paperwork’s going to suck anywhere so, that’s not going to change if you went into any other district, IEPs are IEPs. And I don’t think our district demands more paperwork than any other district, so it would just be the field in general.

Jessica smiled and laughed, “The paperwork piece, if you are terrible at paperwork, Special Ed. is not for you … you got to have … some skills of an organized life in some capacity to maintain,” otherwise “please get out, do everyone a favor.”

With the amount of time special education teachers spend outside the regular school day on paperwork, many reflected on their personal experience with managing their time and planning their schedules so as to not get overwhelmed with their responsibilities. Among the strategies some participants utilized in their planning was spreading out IEPs in order to balance their time and schedules. Often, it is a skill long-tenured teachers identify as one on which they have improved over the span of their careers. While reflecting on her time management over her career, Daisy commented:

You know I would spend hours just getting ready for those 10 IEPs in that two-week period. This year I was able to look ahead and go, okay, October’s coming. You have those same IEPs, you can spread them out a little bit, maybe this direction towards the beginning of October, but they are still happening. So in August I was able to anticipate October, where for two years, I honestly didn’t and I got caught up in it. So the planning and the organizing, the experience from
year to year, learning from your experience and moving on into the next year, that’s been helpful.

Similarly, Faith faced the challenge of time management by spreading out her IEPs as well. She explained, “it’s a struggle … how I manage that is at the beginning of every month, I make phone calls and I line up all my IEP’s for that month.”

Study participants reflected that paperwork and the challenge of time management and organization is one of the greatest challenges they face in their careers. Participants described learning how to manage their time as being a key factor in fostering their resiliency and something that future special education teachers need to consider.

**Negative administrative support.** While study participants identified the importance of positive administrative support as adding to the strength of their resilience, 12 of the 19 (63%) similarly identified negative administrative support as being one of the most detrimental factors to school climate and job satisfaction. When teachers felt supported, they experienced the ability to excel at their duties. When they felt administration was unsupportive, they responded that it had a great effect on their teaching practice.

Mariah commented, “a good administrator, … there can’t be enough said. Ah, last couple of years have been challenging because we had an administrator that came in very negatively, and it affected everyone in the school.” Alice shared that while she understood the economic challenges the district was facing, she questioned the support she received from the District.

I questioned the kind of support that maybe I got from the District in certain things. In kind of the attitude that things can be tough, but you have to persevere. And you can do that … and you can do that, and you wonder how long? Are we
supposed to persevere if we are short all the time, and if we don't have enough people, and if we can't keep people?

Grace was frustrated with the district for not allocating a full-time administrator and believed it was a disservice to the students served. She passionately shared her experience of coming to a new site and feeling that administration was not there to support the specific needs of students at her site.

I see direct evidence that my students don’t mean squat to administration, you know they don’t take the CAHSEE, they don’t take regular star testing which is now going to be, you know, our new common core; but because they don’t make up these numbers on a piece of paper, you know honestly I think I could go to work everyday and have my students color and nobody would care. You know it’s just that feeling that we mean nothing to anybody and it gets very discouraging.

Grace was not the only one discouraged by a lack of administrative support. Eric adamantly described an experience with an administrator in a previous district that made him question staying in the special education profession:

They gave me a Principal that had never been a Principal before. And she really didn't know what she was doing. She ended up trying to make me teach her way. Instead of teach my way she wanted me to disregard the IEP goals she wasn't happy with community based teaching … So she was trying to get me to change a lot of my teaching methods. And the real thing that was the last straw was that she wanted me to disregard the IEP goals. Which is kind of illegal … So she was going to fire me. She actually non-reelected me. Hmm, and it was really challenging because it wasn't a difference of opinion it was control. Because I wasn't doing [what] she was asking me to do, and she was going to get rid of me. She wanted to come up with other reasons why I should be terminated. Which was saying I didn't have schedules on the board.

Participants noted that in the recent five years, four different special education directors have led the district. These multiple transitions were discussed in both interviews and the focus group and appeared to have negative effects on these participants. Helen commented, “we’ve had so much turnover, in the Special Ed
department … I don’t think we’ve got any guidance.” This theme became a key area of conversation in the focus group where six of the seven participants (86%) discussed the challenges of the multiple transitions. Jessica described that it was “detrimental if you don’t because if you don’t have any direction and you don’t know what you’re supposed to be doing and how you’re supposed to be doing it, then how are you making sure that the kids’ best interests are met.”

**District consolidation.** In 2009, TRUSD consolidated four districts into one. This consolidation was described by all 19 special education teachers, who went from smaller districts to a larger district encompassing nearly 28,000 students, as a challenge. Helen expressed that she felt she had lost family from the consolidation and dissemination of her school site.

We were a family, and that’s probably been the biggest difficulty of my whole entire career, changing over. From, from, losing our staff, losing the camaraderie that we had, and it had developed and created the friendships, and that also trickled down into my working with the kids because it was so frustrating.

Helen was not the only teacher frustrated from the experience of the district consolidation. Alice noted, "When I would go to the district office, it was if they didn't know who I was.” Summarizing many long-tenured special educators is Mark’s response:

I thought that it was going to be really great because I thought that we were going to have a continuum of services and we could get the kids early and we could continue all the way through. And it’s just very much more scattered than when it was more than four districts. It seems to have scattered even more.

The support that we had at the, from the um, original District has been completely under minded and we don’t really get any more … I think I had amazing support. I mean I had an amazing program specialist, that for the most part [they] aren’t even there any more, and if they are they are completely overworked and just are not, not even supportive at all. That’s my experience.
Irene described her experience of working in a smaller district before consolidation:

I can speak from experience here, they would have their $500 dollar silk shirts on, and if a kid came up to them with a runny nose they would still give them a hug, they didn’t care. Do I see the new breed of administrators doing that, no, I don’t, I think they’ve detached themselves to kind of an ivory tower. They’ll tell us what to do, but they don’t know the kids. Is that Pollyanna-ish? … No, just I wish administration would come and visit once in a while.

While the district consolidation was a challenge for many special education teachers, many still have hope for the future of the district and the special education director who was recently assigned this past school year. The greatest challenge, as indicated by teachers, is that there has not been consistency with leadership.

**Summary.** Study participants all reported having challenges that have shaped them as professionals and have helped them learn how to be resilient and successful in a challenging field. These challenges include staying on top of their IEP caseloads and managing their time. Another negative challenge participants experienced was having negative administrative support at the site and district level. Finally, study participants identified the transition of consolidating four previous districts into one as having been one of the most difficult experiences they have had to face in their careers.

**Teacher Tenure**

Study participants identified teacher tenure as being among the factors that led them to stay in the district and the profession. While participants talked about being in the profession for the right motivations, many noted that once they had established tenure, the decision to leave to another district or state was limited for many whose careers spanned from 10 to over 40 years. Among the key findings about tenure, teachers described two major themes that included: (a) financial security and (b) longevity.
Financial security. Study participants identified financial security as being a factor in their decision to stay in the special education classroom in TRUSD. Many participants noted they were well compensated for their duties as a teacher. With at least 10 years’ experience in the district, they had all moved up on the salary schedule and at a minimum were now receiving a longevity bonus for their service. When asked, “what keeps participants in the district,” many expressed that to leave would be a financial burden. Eric shared:

I was a new Dad, I had a new son and I needed to find a legitimate job so I could support my family. In education being on a salary scale, the first time I ever looked at a salary scale and not being a hourly employee it was a lot more than I was making.

Others identified that having children and being heads of their household, they felt an obligation to their families to be good providers.

One of the reasons I stayed in that situation was that we had just purchased a home and I didn’t want to make us into a problem where we would have a problem financially if I wasn’t working. And so we decided, we didn’t know if it would be for a few months or a few years, but so we made it work. It all came out positive. (Daisy)

While study participants were predominantly happy and satisfied with their careers in the district, some discussed times in their careers when they had questioned whether to leave to another career or district. Mark was offered a higher paying job in another district but, after consulting with his wife, decided it was not in the best interest of his family.

There is a security issue, now they have money this year, we don’t know if they’re going to have money next year, for the same position. Some of it was just distance, (you know) but the one thing that happens is I can’t leave the district I’m in without taking a massive pay cut which affects my family. And my wife finally woke up to the fact that our daughter wants to go to UC Santa Cruz. She goes “do you know how much it costs to go there” I said, “yea … 22 thousand a
year, it’s expensive,”, she goes, “you knew this” and I go “yea I know that but yea know you, (heavy sigh), schools.”

Mark was not the only one concerned about the cost of sending their children to college. Eric shared, “My kids are in high school, yet haven't gone to college. So, I'm still thinking about … I need to make as much money as possible. So, I can still support them getting into college.”

Study participants pointed out that while financial security is one of the reasons they chose not to leave the district, it was also one of the reasons they were attracted to the district initially. While TRUSD is one large K-12 district, it was consolidated in 2008 from four previous districts. Every participant was a part of one of the previous districts and pointed out that previously, in order to recruit teachers, those districts would accept 10-12 years of prior experience in establishing salaries. For a few of the participants who had worked in previous districts, this was a selling point that brought them here.

I got hired by Elk Grove, Roseville I think those were the only two that offered me a job and then went over to the business office and they started showing me the salary scale. They were telling me they only would allow 4 years max coming in. I was going to have to take a 20 or 30 thousand dollar pay cut. Grant was the only one that said we’ll give you all 10-years. I was 10 years in at that point. (Eric)

Daisy commented that the reason “I chose [this school] was because at that point in time they were accepting up to 12 years of experience, I was up to my 13th year at that point, so that made all the difference for that.”

**Longevity.** Similar to the factors associated with financial security, longevity or tenure was identified by study participants as being another influential factor in why they did not leave their jobs. For many participants like Alice, there is a fear associated with starting new in another district. She shared, “if I went anywhere new I would be the new
person on the totem pole. I would be the first one to get laid off.” Kim also shared this fear.

If I could find a position with more money I would take it. But my age, the security, I'm [over 50]. It is a little scary for me to go to another District and start the 10 years all over again and be evaluated … I need to work, I have to be stable!

Jessica reinforced this perspective.

There’s sort of this fear in you that you shouldn’t leave because of retirement and if you go to a different district you lose this or that. I don’t really know all of the ramifications of that, but that’s a fear … Well because you don’t want to lose the time that you put in somewhere.

While participants noted fears associated with leaving, some also identified nearing retirement as a factor that kept them in their current position.

But I stayed here, and now 30 years in it would not pay me to change schools. But I'm going to be retiring in three to five years, so I'm just going to stay here, it's just beneficial, I’m just going to stay here. (Lynn)

Jessica described the negative reasons teachers stay.

Let’s start with the negatives. I think the negative things that make really poor teachers stay, is the retirement piece and the financial aspect, like the poor special education teachers who are just done being around kids, but stay in the game and just set up detrimental relationships with kids, … it’s a lose-lose for all, well, I guess it’s a win for them because of retirement.

While 95% of the participants described themselves as happy and satisfied with the district and their current classes, many revealed they had thought about leaving but because of their tenure, did not consider it as a plausible economic option.

**Summary.** The study participants in the interviews and focus group described financial security and longevity as being important factors in their decisions to stay in the field of special education within TRUSD. The participants described their personal stories of how financial security impacted their professional careers and influenced their
experience. While a majority of teachers described being adequately paid, many have been deterred from moving to another district because they would not be able to take their tenure and years of service with them.

**Summary of Findings**

Throughout the interviews and focus group, study participants indicated that certain personal characteristics emerged from the personal experiences they described. Among the key characteristics that developed into themes was the ability of long-tenured special education teachers in this study to not internalize or take things personally. Next, participants identified that for many of them, teaching was not their first careers and they shared a value in having prior experience outside education. Further, participants identified personal connections to the special education population and the community in which they served as being impactful in their decision to be invested in their jobs. Additionally, separating work and personal lives was described in this study as an essential characteristic to teachers’ resiliency. Finally participants described their passion and excitement for their job as being a major influence in their ability to be resilient and successful.

All participants described in their personal stories that the most important reason they did what they did was because of the love and care they had for the students with whom they worked on a daily basis. Each participant described their experience of working with special needs students and how they enjoyed seeing students with special needs be successful. Additionally, participants identified having an optimistic and positive attitude is an important factor as to what makes them resilient and successful.
Finally, participants revealed in their descriptions and experiences an ethic of care for students with diverse needs.

Next, participants described how impactful positive supportive relationships are to their resiliency and success as special education teachers. Among the relationships participants described were those with general and special education teachers, mentors and partners, and those of positive administrative support. Participants described how these supportive relationships helped influence their ability to overcome difficult situations and isolation as special education teachers. All participants expressed that feeling supportive in the professional relationship is key to fostering resiliency.

Study participants all communicated having negative challenges and experiences as a long-tenured teacher. Among the most predominate challenges participants described were the challenge of staying on top of their IEP caseloads and managing time, having negative administrative support, and the experience of consolidating four previously smaller districts into a single large district. Although teachers elaborated about the negative challenges that have made them question staying in the district or in the special education field, a majority of teachers in this study (95%) were happy with the positions in which they served.

Lastly, participants in this study identified their experience of needing financial security, their personal longevity, and tenure as being impactful influences in why they chose to teach in TRUSD and continue to stay. Throughout the study, analysis reflected that while over their careers participants may have considered transferring to another district, it was not a financially viable option for their personal situations.
All the participants expressed a passion for teaching special education and working with kids with learning disabilities and shared about their personal experiences of working in TRUSD and previous four consolidated districts. Participants all shared about personal characteristics they had that they described as being impactful in their resiliency and success. One major finding of this study is that participants unanimously described the main reason they did what they did was because of the kids they served. Teachers also addressed the importance of supportive relationships they described as being important factors in their success and resiliency. Participants also reflected that in their careers they experienced negative challenges that led them to question staying in the field of special education. Among the challenges participants described were time management and organization of IEPs, negative administrative support, and the district consolidation. All participants identified experiences that impacted their described ability to be resilient special education teachers in TRUSD.

**Results and Interpretations**

The findings from this phenomenological study of the resiliency of special education teachers emerged from the lived experiences described by the participants. Drawing from these findings, and considering related literature, five results with interpretations are presented: (a) personal characteristics beyond demographics influence teacher resiliency, (b) an ethic of care toward special education students supports resiliency, (c) positive and supportive relationships with professional peers support resiliency, (d) negative challenges build resilience and influence a teacher’s desire to stay committed to the profession and to a particular district, and (e) tenure influences a teacher’s decision to stay committed to a particular district. While extensive research has
been done on why teachers leave the teaching field, only limited research currently addresses how the phenomenon of resilience supports teachers who stay. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the phenomenon of resilience through the shared lived experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of long-tenured (10 or more years) special education teachers in TRUSD.

**Result One: Personal characteristics beyond demographics influence teacher resiliency**

Among the findings of this study is an emphasis by participants that long-tenured special education teachers show a personal characteristic of being able to not internalize events or take personally experiences with students, staff, and parents. Gordon-Rouse (2001) identified that resiliency is “the ability to thrive, mature and increase competence in the face of adverse circumstances or obstacles” (p. 461). Throughout the study, participants identified that not internalizing or taking personally adverse circumstances as a key factor in their resiliency.

Describing their personal connections to the special education population, such as having a child or friend with special needs, many of the participants discussed how this influenced their long-term commitment. Participants shared that it was their connections to the students that made them better teachers. This reinforces Messer (2010), a teacher who commented, “as a parent of a special needs child, I now have a better understanding of all students, and the crucial support they need” (p. 40). For many in this study, connections to students were motivators in bringing them to the special education profession. They found a connection with this population and spoke to the importance of being connected to the school and neighborhood community as being influential in their
decision to stay in TRUSD. Henkin and Holliman (2009) similarly concluded, “commitment is linked to the idea that strongly committed persons identify with, are involved in, and enjoy membership in an organization” (p. 165).

Other major characteristics identified by participants include characteristics such as experiences of careers outside education and the separation of work and an individual’s personal life. Woods and Weasmer (2002) previously found that teachers who had a personal support system were able to reduce stress. They suggested that such a system could include relationships outside work, personal hobbies, or extra-curricular activities such as volunteer work, exercising at a gym, or joining community organizations. Day et al. (2005) also noted that “social life outside of education” is an important factor in one’s ability to be resilient (p. 572).

Finally, participants commented they had a passion and excitement for the job. Many participants described they felt the job of being a special education teacher was never dull or boring. Actually, participants identified the challenges and complexities of the job as being a factor that enabled them to be resilient as they welcomed this difficulty as a positive endeavor that enabled them to stay fresh and current with the curriculum as well as with needs of the students.

**Result Two: An ethic of care toward special education students supports resiliency**

The findings from this study emphasize that participants identified that the greatest factor in the resiliency was that they did what they did because they had an ethic of care for their students. Special education teachers in this study each described their personal experience of working with students with learning disabilities. In each story was an expression of love and care for those they served. This finding supports Vogt’s
(2002) finding, “research has revealed that caring is seen as an integral part of teaching” (p. 262). His study concluded, “a caring teacher is understood to be approachable and interested in the personal situation of each individual child, establishing trust and respect in a caring relationship” (p. 258).

Often, participants referred to their students as being determining influences in their longevity and resiliency and that they genuinely cared for them and were looking out for their best interests. They spoke to how they were inspired by their students as they expressed finding value and personal meaning in making a difference in the lives of special needs students. This aligns with Ahrens (2011) whose findings indicated that among the factors that influence teacher resiliency is “the positive effects of teachers’ impact on the lives of students” (p. 770).

The lived experiences of participants in this study also provides an understanding of how special education teachers cope with what is seen as a challenging and diverse population. Participants in this study concur with Collier’s (2005) determination that “a caring teacher is committed to his or her students. In other words, the teacher accepts responsibility for student performance whether it involves success or failure” (p. 354). Although participants often reflected on the challenges they experienced with their students, participants identified that it was a focus on the positive and the smallest successes as wins that helped them be resilient. Several participants described the great amount of time, energy, and care they gave to their students, reinforcing Collier’s finding that teachers who care “spend significant time and energy on nurturing and sustaining each of their students” (p. 355).
Result Three: Positive and supportive relationships with professional peers influence resiliency

As participants shared their personal experiences of being long-tenured special education teachers, one of the resounding findings in this study was how crucial positive and supportive relationships with professional peers were to their resiliency. This aligns with Schlitchte et al.’s (2005) conclusion that “strongly forged relationships and the accompanying feelings of emotional well-being are protective factors and critical to retention” (p. 39). Participants in this study described these relationships in terms of their peers, partners, and mentors. These positive and supporting relationships made an impact in each of the participant’s resiliency.

Participants also noted that support was not just the support of other special education peers but they also valued support from general education teachers and administration. Often, participants described that how their peers perceived them was important to their motivation and job satisfaction. This finding aligns with Jones et al. (2013) who found that relationships of special education teachers with their general education colleagues are important for new teachers with regard to supporting them in overcoming the challenges they face. Specifically, they shared that the “perception of colleague support was a strong predictor of retention plans” (p. 365).

This study’s findings also align with those of Berry (2012) who studied teachers’ satisfaction toward their work environments and found they were increasingly correlated with the following factors:

(a) the helpfulness of support from administrators, (b) the helpfulness of general education teachers, (c) whether the administrators and general education teachers understood the special educators' roles and responsibilities, and (d) when teachers reported a shared responsibility for the education of students. (p. 12)
Participants often reflected on the importance of their relationships with administration and general education teachers. When participants had supportive relationships, they were often motivated to excel at their duties; when they perceived a negative disconnect, they often described feeling isolated and that it had a negative impact on their experience.

**Result Four: Negative challenges influence a teacher’s desire to stay committed to the profession and a particular district**

In this study, participants expressed that while positive relationships supported their resilience, negative challenges they experienced in their careers conversely led them to question staying in the district or the profession. The major challenges participants in this study described included the challenge of managing time and organization of the IEP process, negative administrative support, and the TRUSD consolidation that occurred in 2009. This finding reaffirms Green (2011) who identified similar factors found to be associated with lower levels of commitment and increased attrition included “(a) a lack of administrative support, and (b) workload issues such as paperwork” (pp. xiii-xiv). This is further supported by Nagel and Brown (2003) who determined that “administrators particularly are in a prime position to affect stress within their schools” (p. 257). In their personal stories, participants described their greatest challenges as special education teachers and gave credence to previous studies not focused on resiliency but attrition (Billingsley, 2003, 2004a, 2005, 2007; Boe et al., 1997; Henkin & Holliman, 2009; Miller, 1999; Singer, 1999)

Another negative challenge experienced by participants was the district consolidation in 2009. For many in this study, the consolidation brought about a great deal of changes, from having a new special education director to dispersing of school
staff. Participants described this experience as being among the most challenging experiences because they described a lack of support from the district administration, which included four directors of special education in the five years since consolidation. This perception reinforces Billingsley’s (2007) finding that a lack of support from administrators was most frequently ranked as the most influential factor in a teacher’s decision to leave the field.

Day and Gu (2009) suggested that long-tenured teachers were more exposed to policy and social change that often frustrated newer, less seasoned teachers. Their conclusions, along with the experience of participants in this study, suggest that long-tenured teachers proved more resilient to policy and social change and their adaptability was often a factor described in their ability to overcome challenges like excessive paperwork, negative administrative support, or a district consolidation.

**Result Five: Teacher tenure and longevity influence a teacher’s decision to stay committed to a particular district**

The findings discussed in this study reveal that teacher tenure and longevity are important factors in a participant’s decision to stay in the current district and role. While 95% of participants described being satisfied with their current positions, a majority also noted that a reason they do not leave has to do with their tenure and its related benefits. This finding supports that of Gilpin (2011) who concluded that the difference in wages of teachers mostly affected the decision to leave teaching by teachers who were inexperienced and had fewer than six years of teaching experience. Gilpin’s findings suggested that as teachers became tenured, they were more likely to stay in teaching and not leave to choose other careers based on occupational salary. This finding also
reinforces Boe et al.’s (1997) conclusion suggesting that turnover decreases as the level of teacher pay increases.

Teacher tenure and longevity appear to motivate participants’ decisions to stay or go. For these 10- to 40-year, long-tenured teachers, leaving the district could mean a significant pay cut that would not be in the best interests of themselves and their families. Further, participants expressed a fear associated with changing to another district related to having to go through the tenure process all over again and the possibility of losing their job in an economically challenging time based on “last in, first out.” This is a common factor and theme participants described in their personal experiences and stories and that influences their resilience.

**Summary**

This chapter discussed the findings of the study and described five major findings that emerged from the research. In addition to the findings, the results of the study were presented and interpreted through the lens of related literature in the field. These results include: (a) personal characteristics beyond demographics influence teacher resiliency, (b) an ethic of care toward special education students supports resiliency, (c) positive and supportive relationships with professional peers influence resiliency, (d) negative challenges influence a teacher’s desire to stay committed to the profession and a particular district, and (e) teacher tenure and longevity influence a teacher’s decision to stay committed to a particular district. Long-tenured special education teacher participants with 10-40 years’ experience expressed a passion for special education and the students with whom they work on a daily basis. The voices of their experience
provide a trail of evidence that informs the study’s conclusions and recommendations discussed in Chapter 5.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

**Introduction**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the phenomenon of resilience through the shared lived experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of long-tenured special education teachers who had worked in TRUSD for 10 or more years. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What is the nature or essence of the experience of teaching special education for many years?
2. How do special education teachers describe what compels them to stay in the special education classroom?
3. How do long-tenured special education teachers understand and perceive the nature of their resiliency?

The participants included 19 credentialed special education teachers. These participants taught in special education settings at the elementary, middle or junior high, and high school levels. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 teachers, a focus group of seven teachers, and field notes and observations maintained in a researcher’s journal. They were interpreted with an analysis of relevant literature.

In the data analysis phase of this study, transcripts of the interviews, focus group, and researcher’s journal were reviewed, analyzed, and synthesized into codes. Codes were reviewed to develop categories and themes. Then the researcher began to develop clusters of meaning from the data collected. Through the process of coding, classifying,
and looking at categories, themes were developed that began to make sense of the data. The findings presented in Chapter 4 emerged from the analysis of the descriptions of the lived experiences, attitudes, and perceptions shared by 19 long-tenured special education teachers in the TRUSD whose behavior reflected the phenomenon of resiliency. The in-depth analysis led to five findings: (a) personal characteristics beyond demographics influence teacher resiliency, (b) an ethic of care toward special education students supports resiliency, (c) positive and supportive relationships with professional peers influence resiliency, (d) negative challenges build resilience and influence a teacher’s desire to stay committed to the profession and a particular district, and (e) tenure influences a teacher’s decision to stay committed to a particular district. Results of the study were interpreted from the findings and situated within relevant literature.

Conclusions from this study were drawn from the findings and interpretations presented in Chapter 4 and reflect a synthesis of the perceptions and experiences in response to the three overarching research questions. Drawing from the findings and conclusions, recommendations for attracting and keeping special education teachers, and suggestions for future research on the resilience of special education teachers are offered.

Conclusions

Drawing from the trail of evidence presented in Chapter 4, the conclusions to the three research questions are provided.

Research Question One: What is the nature or essence of the experience of teaching special education for many years?

The participants in this study were quick to describe the choice of a profession teaching special education as a stressful and challenging career. Participants described
this experience as being filled with mentally and emotionally draining tasks and added pressures that include changing administration; new laws and regulations in special education; and regularly dealing with difficult students, parents, and peers. A conclusion that might be drawn is that special education teachers who stay in the field for many years have an ability to handle and adapt to stressful situations better then those who leave the field within the first few years of teaching.

Participants described that they were called to this profession and had a deep ethic of care and love for the students they served. Participants expressed love and acceptance for their students and identified a unique calling to work with a population of students often overlooked by society. Describing their experience, participants commented that they were able to relate to their students and make connections other educators are unable to make. It appears that when these participants experienced factors that were challenging, it was their personal values and strong commitment to their students’ care that informed their choices to remain in this profession. Participants described their students as being the most influential factor in what kept them in the classroom for as long as they had been.

Another conclusion that emerged is that participants who had taught for many years developed a network of support that enabled them to feel connected to their school. Their propensity to develop relationships with general and other special education teachers helped them attain success in their roles as educators. The participants acknowledged they valued their relationships with other peers as an important factor in their ability to remain in the special education classroom for many years. Participants described the significance of mentors, having partners, and meeting on a regular basis
with other staff as having fostered their commitment to their school, providing them with needed support, and allowing them to overcome feelings of isolation.

Additionally, it can be concluded that the relationship with administration had at times a positive or negative influence on special education teachers. When describing their lived experience, participants commented that when their site administrator supported them, they were driven to do more to support student outcomes. Conversely, feeling unsupported caused them to question staying in the profession and may have impacted their teaching ability. It can be concluded that positive relationships with school and district administrators have a major influence on the experience of the special education teacher.

**Research Question Two: How do special education teachers describe what compels them to stay in the special education classroom?**

Participants rejoiced in seeing the positive difference they make in the lives of the students they serve, regardless of how small the positive change may be. Participants described themselves as being optimistic and although special education students may not be the most successful students, academically or behaviorally, participants were committed by the victories the students experienced even when they seemed small to others. Special education teachers compelled to stay see their calling as to be one who sees the glass as half full as opposed to half empty. This positive outlook was resoundingly described by participants throughout this study and can be concluded to be one of the characteristics that enable special education teachers to be resilient and successful.
Antithetical to the positive descriptions about the power of student success to teacher resilience of these long-tenured participants were that they were also compelled to stay in their current district because they could not transfer their longevity or tenure to another district without penalty. The financial security offered at present District salary levels and seniority, which offered a sense of security in the face of layoffs and retirement pensions, were significant reasons why these participants chose to stay in their current district.

Although some participants described a desire to move to another location in the state or country, they expressed a sense of being compelled to finish their careers in their current district. It may be that there is a sense of fear associated with starting over in a new district, not knowing the expectations, and the very real plausibility that a teacher can be laid off for having the shortest district tenure. Most districts only accept a certain number of years’ experience and the cut in pay and fear of beginning careers at the bottom of the longevity scale for those who were long tenured is something participants considered when they were dissatisfied. It may be concluded that once a teacher accumulates a certain number of years in a particular district, they become financially committed to the district they serve.

**Research Question Three: How do long-tenured special education teachers understand and perceive the nature of their resiliency?**

Long-tenured special education teachers who are resilient see themselves as being able to not internalize, to not take things personally, and to thrive in any situation that comes their way. Participants described their resiliency as being due to their positive outlook upon their careers. When they were faced with difficulties, they relied on a
developed network of support at work and home to counterbalance the stress they encountered in the profession. It appears that resilient special educators had activities, hobbies, friends, and family outside of work upon which they depended to alleviate their work-related stress.

Long-tenured special education teachers described that they had a distinct separation of work and their personal lives in order to maintain personal well-being and balance in their lives. Many participants used exercise as a means to manage frustrations and pressures. Participants engaged in physical activities outside of work determined that such activities and exercise were influential factors in their ability to feel good and thrive under pressure.

A further conclusion that can be drawn from these long-tenured special education teachers is that they understand their resiliency as being something they had developed over the span of their careers. Not one participant described having all the answers in the first few years of their careers. Participants described that they were lifelong learners still learning new things that made their work easier. Their resilience has been enhanced by continuing professional development in special education; adapting best practices learned from other professionals; and developing their collaboration with general, special education teachers, and administration.

When participants are not isolated and interacting with other professionals, they appear to be more empowered to develop their skills and further connect to their schools and community in which they work. It appears from stories told by these participants that new special educators may leave in the first few years because they are disconnected from others and may not be given the supports to understand curriculum, IEPs, and other
responsibilities that ensure success. Long-tenured teachers shared that seeking out mentors and being proactive in getting current data-driven skills may be essential to success.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings, results, and conclusions of this study, the researcher offers the following recommendations toward supporting the development of resiliency and success of special education teachers, specifically in the TRUSD. Hopefully, the recommendations will have meaning for other districts. Additionally, recommendations are provided for follow-up research to continue to expand the body of research focused on the resiliency of special education teachers and retaining their expertise in order to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Classroom teaching alone does not contribute to the resiliency of special education teachers. Given the findings of this study, the following five recommendations are offered to K-12 administrators as they seek to build support and acquire resources to foster resiliency in their special education teachers: (a) develop and maintain a special education mentorship program for special education teachers for their first five years in the field, (b) provide professional development in special education throughout teachers’ careers, (c) personally support and maintain a relationship with your special education teachers, and (d) develop a rewards program to acknowledge special education teacher accomplishments.
Develop and Maintain a Special Education Mentorship Program for the First Five Years

New teachers participate in the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment Program (BTSA) and candidates typically finish the induction period in two years. New teachers are assigned to a support provider who acts as mentor for the teacher. While this is a positive relationship that can be developed, special education teachers who leave the program after two years often describe feeling isolated and not connected to others given the nature of their teaching assignments. While it may not be possible for all special education teachers to obtain a special education mentor within their school, special education teachers should be given the opportunity to make connections with mentors who teach the same subject throughout the district.

These relationships foster trustworthiness and offer a confidential forum that allows teachers in their initial five years to be open to talking about the struggles and challenges they face in the classroom. The district will need to support these mentoring relationships by identifying time for increased collaboration. District administration is encouraged to handpick mentors they believe are qualified to assist new teachers in developing their practice. The district could also provide a benefit the special education programs by hiring qualified special education teachers on special assignment (TOSA’s) whose job it would be to specifically support special education teachers with curriculum, instruction, IEP’s, and behavioral management, as well teaching how to align goals to the common core standards. TOSA’s could perform informal evaluations of teachers and offer suggestions as to how to improve best practices. They could also teach example lessons for teachers to watch as well as offer to sub so that special education teachers
have the time to visit other classrooms and see how other teachers present lessons to their students. TOSA’s could also offer monthly special education trainings in the evenings that focus on areas of need. The district should also provide appropriate training to mentors and TOSA’s in how to provide such leadership.

New teachers in their first through fifth years of teaching will benefit from being mentored and supported by experienced special education teachers who have been trained as mentors. This practice may also benefit the experienced teacher serving as mentor as he or she develops leadership and instructional mentoring skills. In this study, participants voiced that it was the relationships that they built with their mentors and other district leaders who trained them that was beneficial to their resiliency and practice as a special education teacher. By offering more support, new teachers in their first five years can better meet the needs of their students and be better equipped to deal with curriculum, instruction, and behavioral issues.

**Provide Professional Development in Special Education throughout Their Careers**

Among the major challenges participants in this study described were the challenges of managing time and the organization of the IEP process. Participants described that a lack of knowledge with current curriculum, IEP updates, and best practices were obstacles to developing themselves as professionals. Participants described themselves as lifelong learners who would attend trainings if offered. By offering a wide range of special education professional development opportunities, special education teachers may better feel supported in developing themselves as professionals and enhance their confidence in planning and implementing IEPs. Since district special education program specialists and coordinators are often overwhelmed
with responsibilities, districts could utilize the expertise of special education teachers on special assignments (TOSA’s) as well as long tenured teachers who have been identified as having mastered skills as trainers and who could develop a professional development plan for the year. The trainings on this plan can be sent out district wide to teachers who can plan on attending whichever professional development training they believe will assist their needs. In this study, it was the experience of the participants that not enough special education professional development was offered, and if it was they shared that they would want to attend.

**Personally Support and Maintain a Relationship with your Special Education Teachers**

Administration, both at the district and site level, plays a critical role in the sense of efficacy and well being of special education teachers. Principals are among the greatest influences in a special education teacher’s decision to remain in the role or leave the field altogether. This was voiced by all participants who described the positive and negative effects their administrators have had on their careers. To better foster this dynamic relationship, it is important administrators develop a positive and collaborative rapport and relationship with their special education teachers. When a bridge is built between the administrator and special education teacher, communication can be developed to improve behavior management, discipline, and rapport with parents. When teachers feel their administrator is supportive of them, they can better meet the diverse needs of their students to improve student engagement and success. One manner in which this relationship may be fostered is through collaborative meetings such as professional learning communities (PLC’s). Administration, special education teachers,
general education teachers, counselors, and psychologists at each site can meet monthly in PLC’s to discuss specific student issues and how to improve BEST practices for special education students at their site. This collaborative relationship should be a team approach that fosters a partnership and creates a climate of support.

Additionally, if administrators take the time to make themselves visible and approachable to special education teachers, it “makes all the difference in the world.” Special education teachers can feel that their responsibilities are often overlooked by their administration because they deal with lower numbers of students and often the lowest scoring students; these teachers acknowledge that when their skills are appreciated and they are recognized for their achievements, it often motivates and encourages them to do more.

**Develop a Rewards Program to Acknowledge Special Education Teacher Accomplishments**

Participants described that in their experience, they had often felt their roles and responsibilities were overlooked by their general education peers and administration. To promote the narrative that special education teachers are appreciated, having a rewards program that identifies the successes of district special education teachers would promote a culture in which special education teachers’ accomplishments would be acknowledged. Participants commented that when their efforts were recognized by others, they were motivated and inspired to improve their practice. School sites can offer informal incentives such as having a teacher of the week and celebrating the accomplishments of their staff at weekly staff meetings. School sites can also have an acknowledgment box where staff members and students can anonymously nominate staff for an award.
acknowledging their work. Administrators can randomly draw from these nominations and whomever is pulled from the box can receive a token of appreciation such as a gift card. Having a monthly or weekly newsletter sent out to staff identifying teacher accomplishments would also be a way to acknowledge successes that otherwise may be overlooked. Recently, the TRUSD special education department implemented an Awesomeness Award to be given out monthly to a special education staff member who has done something exceptional. Having positive incentives like this may both acknowledge the hard work of special education teachers and encourage special education teachers to rise up so their efforts can be recognized as well.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

Prior research on the subject of special education resiliency has largely followed a deficit model that explains cause and effect relationships between why teachers leave the field and the factors that led to this decision. To add to the literature, it is a recommendation of this study to continue exploring the phenomenon of resiliency that looks at the lived experiences of long-tenured special education teachers and seeks to understand what compels them to stay across a range of school districts. Billingsley (2003) recommended, “future studies should address teachers’ perspectives, observations of their work lives, and analyses of journals and other documents to provide a full understanding of important contributors to job satisfaction, commitment, stress, and career decisions” (p. 32). This study reinforces this recommendation, as further inquiry into the lives of resilient teachers who appear to have overcome the challenges of working in the special education classroom will add to the literature that is lacking in both quantitative and qualitative studies.
Finally, a qualitative study exploring how special education teachers balance their profession careers and personal lives may be a beneficial addition to the literature, as little qualitative inquiry into this subject is offered. In better understanding how special education teachers specifically balance the challenges of work with their personal lives, future mentors and administrators can offer advice to new special education teachers or to long-tenured teachers who are struggling. An in-depth analysis of stayers not only provides an in-depth analysis of resiliency, but may also suggest actions that will foster retention and curtail the shortage of teachers in special education.

Summary

In California and nationally, there is a need to attract and retain special education teachers in the K-12 public school settings. Special education teachers have an epidemic rate of attrition, leaving the field at a percentage rate of 8-10% annually (Whitaker, 2000). This rate is significantly higher than that for general education teachers. While teacher attrition has been studied extensively, little is known about the phenomenon of resiliency for special education teachers who stay. It was the purpose of this study to seek to understand the complexities of the phenomenon of resiliency in special education teachers who remain in the teaching role for extended periods. Further, this study sought to explore the phenomenon of resilience through the shared lived experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of long-tenured (10 or more years) special education teachers in TRUSD and gave voice to their personal experiences. The study sought to better understand the phenomenon of special education teacher longevity, what compels the teachers to stay committed and successful, and how they personally perceive their experience.
A phenomenological approach yielded five major findings or results from the shared experiences of 19 long-tenured special education teachers in TRUSD. The five results with interpretations that are presented include: (a) personal characteristics beyond demographics influence teacher resiliency, (b) an ethic of care toward special education students supports resiliency, (c) positive and supportive relationships with professional peers support resiliency, (d) negative challenges build resilience and influence a teacher’s desire to stay committed to the profession and a particular district, and (e) tenure influences a teacher’s decision to stay committed to a particular district. From a synthesis of these findings, this study offers recommendations to both the school site- and district-level administrators to provide professional development, collaboration, and the financial incentives for successful special education teachers to be attracted to the TRUSD. The four recommendations offered to K-12 administration that would build support and acquire resources for their special education teachers include: (a) develop and maintain a special education mentorship program, (b) provide professional development in special education, (c) personally support and maintain a relationship with your special education teachers, and (d) develop a rewards program to acknowledge special education teacher accomplishments.

As I began this study, I had been teaching special education for over 10 years as a mild/moderate teacher in an SDC emotionally disturbed classroom. During the study, I ventured into elementary special education to expand my K-12 experience. Currently, I am a secondary administrator at a Middle School that encompasses fifth through eighth grade students in TRUSD. These role changes were extremely advantageous for me, as it not only gave me a perspective of the challenges facing district wide special education
teachers but equipped me with an understanding of how to be a more effective administrator who can support the resiliency of all teachers with whom I work. This has enabled me to become a better listener who, as a phenomenological researcher, views all information as data that can influence positive change. Personally, hearing the stories and experience of participants has also motivated me to meet with all my staff in a collaborative process whereby we focus on the positive beliefs that all students can learn and that teachers want to better help students learn. This ongoing dialogue is intended to develop an improved school climate that encourages teachers and administrators to perform best practices that meet all student needs.

Much of what I have learned has been integrated into my personal leadership style, as I now am in a position to influence school climate beyond the classroom. With a focus on building community, a positive school climate, and improved student and teacher satisfaction and well being, my school is already seeing positive changes occur that are attracting more students. Likewise, I hope my recommendations will be taken under advisement in order for the district to improve the climate among currently employed special education teachers and add to the outreach plans to improve attraction among special educators who have shown a positive ability to influence student learning. It is my hope and desire that this study is constructive and improves the ability of TRUSD to make an impactful and positive difference in the lives of students.
List of References


Green, J. D. (2011). Factors related to special education teacher job commitment: A study of one large metropolitan school district in southern California (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Full Text; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (861041377)


Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol/Semi-Structured Questions

Interview Time: ______________________  Interview Date: ______________________
Interview Location: __________________ Interviewer: Travis Cunningham
Interviewee: ________________________  Title: ________________________________

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the phenomenon of resilience through the shared lived experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of long-tenured (ten or more years) special education teachers in the Twin Rivers Unified School District (TRUSD). The audio-recorded interview is anticipated to last 30-45 minutes as you respond to 10 questions regarding your experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of teaching special education in the TRUSD with a focus on your resiliency. I will also take notes throughout the interview to record pertinent observations to this study.

Confidentiality is important. Your name as an interviewee will be replaced with a fictitious name (pseudonym) to maintain confidentiality. All data collected will be maintained in a secure locked cabinet at Drexel University Sacramento.

As a requirement of this research project, I must have your stated consent to participate in this study. As a reminder, you can withdraw from the study at any time. At this time, I am inviting you to ask any unanswered questions. Do you agree to participate? (Turn on the recorder, read the formal consent statement and verbal consent). Thank you for your participation.

I will now turn on the recording devices and begin recording.

Interview Questions

1. What led you to the field of special education?

2. What keeps you in teaching and specifically in the special education arena?

3. What keeps you in TRUSD (and kept you in your former District)?

4. Many young teacher’s leave the profession in their first five years, what experiences did you have in your first five years that kept you committed to staying in the field and in the District?

5. What experiences did you have that may have led you to question staying in the field and in the District?

6. a. How did you respond to each of these challenges?
   b. Who supported you during these moments?
7. Describe what it is that makes you resilient (and successful).

8. What have you observed about the resilience of other teachers who stay?

9. In the present milieu what keeps you focused and committed?

10. What advice would you give a new special education teacher?

**Closing**
Thank you for your time and participation. After I’ve completed the interviews, I will write a summary of your interview. Would you like a copy of the interview we’ve conducted today? Again thank you.
Appendix B: Letter/Email of Invitation

Letter/Email of Invitation and Follow-Up

Date_____________________
Dear ______________________

My name is Travis Cunningham; I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership and Management program at Drexel University Sacramento under the supervision of Dr. Kathy Geller, Principal Investigator and dissertation Supervising Professor. I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study on the resiliency of special education teachers. The title of my dissertation is: A phenomenological Study of the Resiliency of Special Education Teachers. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of long tenured (ten or more years) special education teachers in the Twin Rivers Unified School District. This study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

For your information, the term and concept of resiliency is central in this study. Given the lack of common definition of resiliency in the literature, in this study it is defined as “the ability to thrive, mature and increase competence in the face of adverse circumstances or obstacles. These circumstances may be severe and infrequent or chronic and consistent. In order to thrive, mature, and increase competence, a person must draw on all of their resources: biological, psychological, and environmental. Resilience, therefore, is a multifaceted phenomenon” (p.461). However, there are several other definitions of the term and they are welcomed in the study.

Your participation in this research study is strictly voluntary. If you consent to participate, you will be provided a copy of the questions one week in advance of the interview, or focus group. You will engage in either a single face-to-face, 45-60-minute semi-structured interview of 10 questions, or a 60-90 minute focus group that consist of 5 questions. I will also take notes throughout the interview and focus group to record pertinent observations to this study. The interview or focus group will be scheduled based upon your convenience, and will be held at the Twin Rivers Unified School District or a nearby location of your choice.

During the interview, or focus group your responses will be digitally recorded. I will also be taking notes as you provide responses to the questions asked. Later these recordings will be transcribed and become the basis for the study’s findings and conclusions. At no point will you be personally identified, rather a pseudonym will be used from the beginning of the study. The recording of your conversation will be handled with the utmost discretion. All recordings will be kept in strict confidence. Both recordings and all information pertaining to the study will be maintained in a locked cabinet at Drexel University.
There are no known risks and/or discomforts associated with this study. If you have any concerns or questions you are encouraged to ask them at any time. You may opt out of this study at any time and for any reason.

If you have any questions, I would be happy to talk to you in more detail. I can be reached at (916)-202-0948 or by email at tgc34@drexel.edu. You may also contact the Principal Investigator: Kathy Geller, Ph.D., Drexel University (Sacramento Campus), School of Education, (916) 213- 2790; Kdg39@drexel.edu.

In the coming week, once you acknowledge your willingness to participate, I will follow-up this email with a telephone call to verify your interest and schedule the interview session.

Sincerely,

Travis Cunningham
Travis Cunningham
Doctoral Candidate
EdD in Educational Leadership and Management
Drexel University, Sacramento Campus
School of Education
Email Follow Up To Volunteers
For Special Education Teachers Who Volunteer to Participate in this Research

Thank you for your willingness to participate in the research study, *A Phenomenological Study of the Resiliency of Special Education Teachers*, being conducted by Travis Cunningham, a Doctoral Candidate at Drexel University and Co-Investigator. This study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in the Drexel University School of Education, Educational Leadership and Management program under the supervision of Kathy D. Geller, Ph.D., Principal Investigator and Dissertation Committee Chair.

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the phenomenon of resilience through the experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of long-tenured (ten or more years) special education teachers in the Twin Rivers Unified School District (TRUSD). You are eligible to participate in this study because of your role as a special education teacher in the Twin Rivers Unified School District.

As a participant, you will engage in either a one-to-one interview that is expected to last 30-45 minutes, or a six-teacher focus group that lasts approximately 60-90 minutes. The interview will include ten open-ended questions regarding your experiences, attitudes, and perceptions as they relate to your tenure within the TRUSD. In addition to these ten questions some additional questions may be asked to more deeply understand your responses. If you are assigned to the focus group you will dialogue with several others responding to five open-ended questions. In both the interview and the focus group, in addition to a recorded transcript, the Co-Investigator may also record his observations.

Prior to beginning the interview the consent form will be reviewed with you, and your consent will be requested verbally at that time. Upon your consent the interview or focus group will commence. Your confidentiality and privacy are critical and will be maintained throughout the study. Your name or any other identifying information will be omitted in conversation and records. While the District may be identified, participating teachers will only be identified with a random pseudonym on all records. All of the transcripts and notes pertaining to the interview will be maintained in a locked cabinet at Drexel University Sacramento and only available to Dr. Kathy Geller, Principal Investigator and Travis Cunningham, the co-Investigator, and members of the Drexel University Institutional Review Board for ethical oversight.

Please understand that your participation in this study is strictly voluntary and at any given time you have the right to refuse to participate or discontinue your participation. Should you choose to end the conversation early, your data will not be included in the study’s findings and conclusions. For your information, there are no known risks or discomforts associated with this study.
If you have any questions about the study, please contact Travis Cunningham at ke86@drexel.edu / (831) 325-4136. You may also contact the Principal Investigator Kathy Geller, Ph.D., Drexel University, School of Education in Sacramento at kdg39@drexel.edu / (916) 213-2790.
Appendix C: Consent to Take Part in a Research Study

1. Title of research study:
   A Phenomenological Study of the Resiliency of Special Education Teachers

2. Researchers:
   Dr. Kathy Geller, Principal Investigator
   Travis Cunningham, Doctoral Candidate, Drexel University, Co-Investigator

3. Why you are being invited to take part in a research study
   We invite you to participate in a research study because of your role as a special education teacher with ten years of tenure or more in the Twin Rivers Unified School District.

4. What you should know about a research study
   - The research study will be explained to you.
   - Your participation is voluntary; therefore you may choose whether or not to participate.
   - If you choose to participate, you may cancel your involvement in the study at any time.
   - If you decide to not be a part of this research no one will hold it against you.
   - Feel free to ask all the questions you want before you decide.

5. Who can you talk to about this research study?
   If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, contact the Principal Investigator Dr. Kathy Geller at kdg39@drexel.edu.
   This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB). An IRB reviews research projects so that steps are taken to protect the rights and welfare of human subjects taking part in the research. You may talk to them at (215) 255-7857 or email HRPP@drexel.edu for any of the following:
   - Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
   - You cannot reach the research team.
   - You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
   - You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
   - You want to get information or provide input about this research.
6. Why is this research being done?
   The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the phenomenon of resilience through the shared lived experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of long-tenured (ten or more years) special education teachers in the Twin Rivers Unified School District (TRUSD).

7. How long will the research last?
   This research is being conducted with 19 long-tenured (10 or more years) Special Education Teachers in the TRUSD. Teachers will either participate in a one-to-one interview for 45-60 minutes or a six-person focus group for 60-90 minutes. Interviews and the focus group are planned to be conducted between March and June 2014. The analysis of data and research report presented as a Doctoral Dissertation will be completed by March 2015.

8. How many people will be studied?
   We expect about approximately 19 of the 165 Special Education Teachers in the TRUSD will participate in this research study.

9. What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?
   - You will receive an email describing the interview and focus group information. You will also receive this “Permission Document for your personal review. These emails will be followed by a call from Travis Cunningham who will setup a date and time for the interview or the focus group.
   - Prior to the start of your participation, the Co-Investigator will review this form with you and gain your verbal consent to participate in this process.
   - You will interact with Travis Cunningham, Doctoral Candidate at Drexel University School Of Education.
   - The interviews will be at your place of employment, The Twin Rivers Unified School District.
   - The interview and focus group research is planned to be done during March – June 2014.
   - You will participate in a single conversation: either a 45 - 60 minute interview or a 60 -90 minute focus group. At either session two digital recorders will be used to assure a verbatim record of the questions and responses.
   - To maintain your confidentiality you will only be identified by a pseudonym and identified throughout the study on the recordings and in any transcriptions, analysis or reporting by this label.

10. What happens if I do not want to be in this research?
    You may decide not to take part in the research and it will not be held against you.
12. What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?
   If you agree to take part in the research now, you can stop at any time; it will not be held against you.

13. Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?
   There is no inherent risk to participation in this research study including physical, psychological, privacy, legal, social or economic risk to the participants.

14. Do I have to pay for anything while I am on this study?
   There is no cost to you for participating in this study.

15. Will being in this study help me in any way?
   There are no benefits to you for taking part in this research. We cannot promise any benefits to others for your participation in this research.

16. What happens to the information we collect?
   Efforts will be made to limit access to your personal information including research study records, to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete secrecy. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the Drexel University Institutional Review Board and other representatives of the University.

   Following the completion of the study, the Principal Investigator will maintain in a locked cabinet in her department at Drexel for a period of three years the following original records: Correspondence, research proposal, data collection instrument, data and results, audio and video tapes, protocols, Drexel IRB submission, approved informed consent form, training certifications, and any other documents required by regulations. The co-investigator may also retain copies of the above. These will be maintained as data records on a flash drive in a locked drawer in the co-investigators home. The co-investigator will erase the flash drive files when he has completed his work with this data.

   We may publish the results of this research. However, we will keep your name and other identifying information confidential.

17. Can I be removed from the research without my OK?
   The person in charge of the research study or the sponsor can remove you from the research study without your approval.
   We will inform you about any new information that may affect your welfare or choice to stay in the research.

18. What else do I need to know?
   This research study is being conducted by Drexel University.
Appendix D: Focus Group Protocol

Focus Group Protocol/Semi-Structured Questions

Interview Time: ______________________  Interview Date: ______________________
Interview Location: ____________________  Interviewer: Travis Cunningham
Interviewee: __________________________  Title: ____________________________

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the phenomenon of resilience through the shared lived experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of long-tenured (ten or more years) special education teachers in the Twin Rivers Unified School District (TRUSD). The audio-recorded focus group is anticipated to last 60-90 minutes as you respond to 5 questions regarding your experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of teaching special education in the TRUSD with a focus on your resiliency. I will also take notes throughout the interview to record pertinent observations to this study.

Confidentiality is important. Your name as an interviewee will be replaced with a fictitious name (pseudonym) to maintain confidentiality. All data collected will be maintained in a secure locked cabinet at Drexel University Sacramento.

As a requirement of this research project, I must have your stated consent to participate in this study. As a reminder, you can withdraw from the study at any time. At this time, I am inviting you to ask any unanswered questions. Do you agree to participate? (Turn on the recorder, read the formal consent statement and verbal consent). Thank you for your participation.

I will now turn on the recording devices and begin recording.

Interview Questions

1. What led each of you to the field of special education?

2. What has kept you in this profession?

3. What impact does working in the TRUSD have on you?

4. How would you describe teacher resiliency?

5. “12% of special education teachers leave in the first few years of teaching.” What advice would you give a new special education teacher?

Closing
Thank you for your time and participation. After I’ve completed the focus group, I will write a summary of the event. Would you like a copy of the focus group we’ve conducted today? Let me know. Again thank you.