URBAN SPECIAL EDUCATORS’ PERCEPTIONS OF PREPAREDNESS AND SELF-EFFICACY TO TEACH STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Amy J. Carroll

BA, Liberal Arts, Excelsior College, 1998
MS, Elementary Education, Southern Connecticut State University, 2010

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education in Instructional Leadership
in the Department of Education and Educational Psychology
at Western Connecticut State University
2019
URBAN SPECIAL EDUCATORS’ PERCEPTIONS OF PREPAREDNESS AND
SELF-EFFICACY TO TEACH STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Amy J. Carroll, EdD
Western Connecticut State University

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand special education teachers’ perceptions of their preparedness to teach students with learning disabilities in urban schools, particularly in relation to their expectations based on their teacher preparation programs. This study also examined special educators’ perceptions of self-efficacy to teach students with learning disabilities, and experiences they identified as rewarding and challenging in their urban settings. This multiple case study took place in a large urban school district in the northeast United States in February to May 2019. Participants consisted of 34 special education teachers who completed a demographic survey and the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale. Six of these special education teachers participated in semi-structured interviews and open-ended reflective prompts. Five themes emerged from the analysis about special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy: (a) They participated in teacher preparation programs that varied in requirements, support, and perceived value; (b) They recalled having varying perceptions of their preparedness for teaching upon the completion of their teacher preparation programs; (c) They readily identified specific challenges and rewards in their teaching positions; (d) The majority of special education
teachers did not feel exceptional learner ready on day one for student behaviors; and (e) They received support from various sources in their teaching career. The significance of each theme and its implications for education and research were discussed.
Copyright by

Amy J. Carroll, EdD

2019
Doctor of Education Dissertation

URBAN SPECIAL EDUCATORS’ PERCEPTIONS OF PREPAREDNESS AND SELF-EFFICACY TO TEACH STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Presented by

Amy J. Carroll, EdD

Catherine O’Callaghan, PhD
Primary Advisor
Signature
Date

Jan Harting-McChesney, EdD
Secondary Advisor Committee Member
Signature
Date

Melissa Jenkins, EdD
Secondary Advisor Committee Member
Signature
Date

Marcia A. B. Delcourt, PhD
Program Coordinator
Signature
Date
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The successful completion of a dissertation and doctoral degree requires commitment, tenacity, and the assistance of others. Numerous people deserve recognition for their support in this process. First, I would like to thank my primary advisor, Dr. Catherine O’Callaghan, for her advice, accessibility, and encouragement over the course of this project. I also would like to thank my secondary advisors, Dr. Jan Harting-McChesney and Dr. Melissa Jenkins, and the program coordinator, Dr. Marcy Delcourt, for their invaluable input and expertise. I also extend thanks to my reader, Dr. Emily Rhew, for her helpful feedback.

In addition, I wish to thank the professors of the Instructional Leadership program at Western Connecticut State University for their commitment to scholarship and high-caliber teaching, especially Dr. Jody Piro and Dr. Tricia Stewart. I am particularly grateful for the members of Cohort Seven, with whom I studied and collaborated weekly for three years.

I also acknowledge the assistance of the administrators and teachers of the participating school district. It was a pleasure to learn from the experiences and insight of the highly dedicated special educators with whom I spoke.

I extend additional gratitude to my family, friends, church community, as well as Stephanie Milo, who provided over 600 hours of child care throughout the doctoral program. I am especially grateful to my son, Nathaniel, whose sacrifice of my attention allowed me to complete a work that I hope will benefit many learners and leaders.

Soli Deo gloria.
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my son and my students, who inspire me to live, lead, and teach with my greatest effort so they can achieve their highest outcomes.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract i

Chapter One: Introduction and Identification of the Topic 1
  Rationale 1
  Statement of the Problem 2
  Significance and Benefits of the Research 3
  Definition of Key Terms 4

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature 7
  Literature Review Process 7
  Retention of Special Education Teachers and Impact on Student Achievement 9
    Retention of Special Education Teachers 9
    Impact on Student Achievement 12
  Effective Preparation Programs for Special Education Teachers 13
    Types of Teacher Preparation Programs 14
    Behavior and Classroom Management 15
    Collaboration and Co-Teaching 19
    Case Management 20
  Social Cognitive Theory 22
  Self-Efficacy 24
  Self-Efficacy of Special Education Teachers 28
  Summary 34
Chapter Three: Methodology

Researcher Biography 36

Description of Setting, Participants, and Sampling Procedures 37

Research Questions 43

Description of the Research Design 44

Instrumentation 44

Demographic Survey 44

Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale 45

Semi-Structured Interview Questions 46

Open-Ended Reflective Prompts 47

Description and Justification of the Analyses 48

Data Collection Procedures and Timeline 49

Statement of Ethics 52

Chapter Four: Analysis of the Data and Explanation of the Findings 54

Description of Data 54

Data Analysis 55

Instruments 56

Case Study Participants 58

Tina 59

Beth 61

Allison 62

Donna 64
Melissa

Krista

Themes

Theme 1: Special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy participated in teacher preparation programs that varied in requirements, support, and perceived value

Theme 2: Special Education Teachers with a Strong Sense of Self-Efficacy Recalled Having Varying Perceptions of Their Preparedness for Teaching Upon the Completion of Their Teacher Preparation Programs

Theme 3: Special Education Teachers with a Strong Sense of Self-Efficacy Readily Identified Specific Rewards and Challenges in Their Teaching Positions

Theme 4: The Majority of Special Education Teachers Did Not Feel Exceptional Learner Ready on Day One for Student Behaviors

Theme 5: Special Education Teachers with a Strong Sense of Self-Efficacy Received Support from Various Sources in Their Teaching Career

Discussion of Research Questions

Research Question 1 Analysis

Research Question 2 Analysis

Research Question 3 Analysis
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five: Summary and Conclusions</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of the Study</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review of Results</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 1</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 2</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 3</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 1</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 2</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 3</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Education</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 1</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 2</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 3</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Future Research</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 1</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 2</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 3</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendices

Appendix A: Permission Letter to Superintendent 156
Appendix B: Permission Letter to Principal 158
Appendix C: Consent Letter to Teacher 160
Appendix D: Demographic Survey 162
Appendix E: Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013) 165
Appendix F: Permission to Use and Include a Copy in the Dissertation Appendix of Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013) 168
Appendix G: Consent Letter to Teacher for Interview and Open-Ended Reflective Prompts 171
Appendix H: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol 173
Appendix I: Open-Ended Reflective Prompts 176
Appendix J: Qualitative Coding and Analysis 178

Tables

Table 1: Comparison of Demographic Information of Prospective Research Site and State Averages 38
Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Participants in Demographic Survey and Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013) 40
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The career preparedness and self-efficacy of special education teachers are important topics in education due to the low rate of retention of educators in urban school districts (Rushton, 2000). Thorough preparation and a strong sense of self-efficacy are especially important for teachers who work with students with disabilities (Dawson & Scott, 2013). Teacher self-efficacy, which is influenced by student achievement, significantly impacts teacher retention (Pedota, 2015). Turnover rates are up to 50% higher in low-income schools than in more affluent districts (Ingersoll, 2001), resulting in a large population of inexperienced teachers (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003).

The purposes of this study were to discover urban special education teachers’ perceptions of their preparedness to teach students with learning disabilities, to gain insight into their perceptions of self-efficacy, and to learn about experiences teachers identified as particularly rewarding or challenging in urban settings. The findings of this study led to insights regarding effective ways to prepare and support teachers in urban districts.

Rationale

The annual turnover rate of teachers is 13.2% nationally (Bland, Church, & Luo, 2014). This figure includes the attrition of teachers who leave the profession, and the migration of teachers into other teaching positions (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Investigation into the areas of preparedness and self-efficacy of urban special educators is valuable because the degrees to which educators perceive themselves as prepared and self-efficacious potentially impact the academic success of students with disabilities and the retention of teachers in urban school districts (Pedota, 2015; Rushton, 2000).
The research underlying this study is relevant to leaders and teachers in urban school districts due to the challenges of teaching in such settings (Bland et al., 2014), including the high needs of many students and historically limited resources (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013). This study also is relevant to the leaders of teacher preparation programs at universities, where aspiring educators prepare for demanding yet meaningful work in urban schools. Effective preparation of special education teachers to meet the challenges of working in an urban environment and the pursuit of a high level of self-efficacy ultimately will benefit students (Pedota, 2015; Rushton, 2000).

**Statement of the Problem**

Teacher retention is a particularly significant issue in urban school districts, where half of teachers depart the education field within the first five years of their career (Bland et al., 2014). Teachers are less likely to remain in urban districts than suburban educational settings, and teachers who remain in urban districts are more likely to transfer to higher performing schools within the city (Planty et al., 2008).

When teachers depart from their positions in urban schools, they frequently are replaced by less prepared and less effective educators, creating a cycle of inexperienced teachers working with a challenging student population (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Ronfeldt et al., 2013). Staff turnover makes it difficult for administrators to build a team of experienced, invested educators who have participated in professional and curriculum development, and who can build relationships with families and the community (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011).
Turnover of teachers negatively affects the school environment and student achievement (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Young, 2018). Conversely, academic achievement is impacted positively by experienced teachers who have a high degree of self-efficacy (Gibson & Dembo, 1984; Kim & Seo, 2018). Research indicates that special educators with a high degree of self-efficacy are more likely to continue teaching (Lee, Patterson, & Vega, 2011). Thorough preparation of special education teachers is an important contributor to improved retention, self-efficacy, and student achievement (Boe et al., 2013; Mason-Williams, 2015). Therefore, this research explored urban special educators’ perceptions of their preparedness and self-efficacy to teach students with learning disabilities.

**Significance and Benefits of the Research**

Recent relevant research has focused on urban teacher retention, self-efficacy of special educators, and self-efficacy of urban teachers (Dawson & Scott, 2013; Pedota, 2015; Rushton, 2000). Minimal research exists about the self-efficacy of special education teachers in urban schools and their preparation for challenging contexts. This study serves to fill a gap in this research area. This topic is significant because improvement in teacher self-efficacy and preparation for the demands of teaching special education may lead to improved retention of special education teachers and increased academic growth of students in urban settings.

Results of this study provided insight into the self-efficacy of urban special educators, the degree to which they felt their preservice program prepared them for the challenges of teaching in an urban setting, and their current perspectives about teaching. Through this
study, participants revealed insight into the rewarding and challenging experiences of working with students identified as learning disabled who attend school in an urban district.

**Definition of Key Terms**

The following terms are used in this research study:

1. **Career preparedness**, or career readiness, refers to the “demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for a successful transition into the workplace” (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018, Definition of Career Readiness and Competencies section).

2. **Case management** refers to duties of special education teachers such as the development and implementation of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), administration and reporting of academic achievement evaluations, maintenance of student records and data, attendance at meetings with personnel and families, and coordination of services among general and special educators, and related service providers (Council for Exceptional Children, 2019; Kamens, 2004).

3. **Inclusion** is “the provision of educational services to students with a full range of abilities and disabilities in the general education classroom with appropriate in-class support” (Roach, 1995, p. 295).

4. **Preparedness** is defined in this study as participants’ recollections of their initial teacher preparation program and preparation to teach students with special needs.

5. **Self-efficacy** is defined as the belief in one’s own personal capabilities. The perception of one’s self-efficacy impacts cognitive, motivational, and emotional functioning (Bandura,
5

1995). Bandura (1995) further defined self-efficacy as “the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations” (p. 2).

6. **Special education teachers** teach students in pre-kindergarten through grade 12 who have disabilities including learning, intellectual, emotional, and physical, and other health impairments. They may teach in resource, co-taught, or self-contained types of classes. They are responsible for modifying general classroom work and provide direct instruction in academic subjects to students with mild and moderate disabilities. In addition, special education teachers provide instruction in functional life skills to students with severe disabilities (Truity, 2017).

7. A **specific learning disability** is “a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations” (McFarland et al., 2018, p. 74).

8. **Teacher attrition** refers to the departure of teachers from the education profession for employment in other fields (Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003).

9. **Teacher migration** refers to the movement or transferring of teachers to positions in other schools and districts (Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003).

10. **Teacher preparation programs** are state-approved programs at public and private universities through which undergraduate and graduate students become certified to teach a variety of subjects and grades in public schools (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2017).
11. **Teacher self-efficacy** is one’s belief in his or her ability to impact students’ learning, even among challenging or unmotivated students (Bandura, 1977a; Pedota, 2015). It also is defined as “positive change in attitude toward self, teaching, and working with others” (Rushton, 2000, p. 371).

12. **Teacher turnover** refers to the loss of personnel whose primary role is classroom teaching to other positions within a school district, to another school district, or to jobs outside of education (Colorado Department of Education, 2015). Teacher turnover includes attrition and migration (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003).

13. **Urban public school settings** include elementary, middle, and high schools located with the boundaries of cities. They may be in high need of teaching staff and resources (Teach, 2017).
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A review of the literature, which creates a context for this research study, is presented in five sections. The first section addresses the retention of special education teachers and the impact of retention on student achievement. Research about aspects of effective preparation programs for special education teachers is the focus of the second section. The following sections provide research related to social cognitive theory and self-efficacy. The fifth section reviews literature about the self-efficacy of special education teachers. Finally, a summary of the research and its relevance to this study is presented.

Literature Review Process

The researcher accessed the online academic databases Academic Search Premier, Education Research Complete, Education Resource Information Center (ERIC), and PsycINFO, in addition to sources in print from the university library. Searches were narrowed by limiting the results to full text articles from peer reviewed academic journals published within the last 10 years. Additional articles, including seminal works older than 10 years, were sought through review of the references of relevant studies. Search terms for the first section were “special education teacher retention” and “teacher turnover and student achievement.” The search terms “special education teacher retention” yielded 240 results, which were reduced to 32 by limiting the results to studies conducted in the United States. The phrase “teacher turnover and student achievement,” which initially generated 1,223 results from online academic databases, resulted in 138 studies conducted in the United States. A search for peer reviewed articles using the search terms “special education teacher retention achievement” and “special education retention achievement” yielded a small
number of results that were not relevant to this study. Upon review of the titles and abstracts of the narrowed results, five research studies were identified as pertinent to the first section of the literature review.

For the second section, the researcher located research studies using the following search terms: (a) special education effective teacher preparation, (b) special education teacher preparation behavior, (c) special education teacher preparation classroom management, (d) special education preparation collaboration, and (e) special education teacher preparation IEPs. The search terms “special education effective teacher preparation” produced 31 results, “special education teacher preparation behavior” resulted in 7 matches, and “special education teacher preparation classroom management” matched 46 articles. In addition, searches for “special education teacher preparation collaboration” generated 25 results, and “special education teacher preparation IEPs” matched two articles. A search for “special education case management” yielded no relevant results; therefore, studies were located using the term “IEPs” instead. A thorough review of the titles and abstracts of listed articles resulted in the identification of seven peer reviewed studies for the second section.

To locate sources for the third and fourth sections, the researcher searched for books and journal articles by Albert Bandura, who is considered a leading researcher in the field of social cognitive theory and self-efficacy. Sources were found using the search terms “social cognitive theory” and “self-efficacy.” A search of works written by Bandura using the phrase “social cognitive theory” produced 57 results within unlimited publication dates. A search of sources by Bandura using the term “self-efficacy” resulted in 91 matches. Sources by researchers associated with Bandura also were sought. A total of 11 books and articles by
Bandura and four by associated researchers were identified as relevant to these sections of the literature review.

For the final section of the literature review, the researcher searched the aforementioned online databases for journal articles using the search terms (a) self-efficacy special education teachers, (b) teacher efficacy student achievement, and (c) self-efficacy pre-service teachers. The terms “self-efficacy special education teachers” resulted in 106 matches. A search for “teacher efficacy student achievement” generated 633 results, which reduced to 48 when limited to studies conducted in the United States. An additional search using the phrase “self-efficacy pre-service teachers” produced 860 results, which included 19 studies from in the United States. Google Scholar was also consulted to find relevant sources, some of which focused on research outside of the United States, and were cited frequently in other works. Based upon review of the abstracts of the reduced number of articles, seven relevant studies were selected for this section of the literature review.

**Retention of Special Education Teachers and Impact on Student Achievement**

**Retention of Special Education Teachers**

The rate of attrition among special educators is double that of general education teachers, with 13% leaving the field annually and 25% within three years (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008). An additional 20% of special education teachers transfer to jobs in general education or other special education positions each year (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2008). Special educators in their first year of teaching are more than twice as likely to leave their positions as new general education teachers (Lee et al., 2011).
Special education teachers, particularly those at the beginning of their career, commonly are overwhelmed by the workload of teaching and case management (Bettini et al., 2017; Cancio et al., 2018). Reasons for the attrition of special education teachers include stress, excessive paperwork, school climate, lack of administrative support, minimal collaboration with colleagues, and feelings of isolation (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Berry, Rasberry, & Williams, 2007; Cancio et al., 2018; Leko & Smith, 2010).

Administrators face challenges in retaining qualified special education teachers in schools in high-crime neighborhoods with high rates of poverty and minority enrollment (Boe et al., 2013). Given the high needs of the student population of urban settings, the high rate of teacher turnover is particularly impactful on schools where expertise is needed most (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2008; Guin, 2004). Additionally, the attrition of special educators, who often work with particular students over the course of several years, disrupts the continuity of student instruction.

Research has been conducted to study the relationship between pre-service special education student teaching and teacher retention. Connelly and Graham (2009) conducted a quantitative study to determine if novice special educators were more likely to leave the profession if they participated in minimal or no student teaching, and if other factors related to preparation influenced novice teachers’ departure from the field. The researchers accessed data from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), the largest survey of elementary and secondary schools in the United States, and Teacher Follow-Up Survey (TFS), which provided data about the number retained teachers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015, 2019). Connelly and Graham identified 4,753 special educators who participated in
the SASS, of which 456 completed the subsequent TFS the following year. Of these 456 teachers, they selected for their study the 168 special educators who reported teaching fewer than three years on the SASS.

A logistic regression analysis showed that 79.0% \((n = 94)\) of special education teachers who completed 10 or more weeks of student teaching continued teaching after their first year, while 63.3% \((n = 31)\) of teachers who student taught for fewer than 10 weeks continued teaching beyond the first year. In addition, findings revealed that 14.3% \((n = 17)\) of the special education teachers who student taught at least 10 weeks, left the education field after one year and 6.7% \((n = 8)\) moved to a different teaching position; whereas 20.4% \((n = 10)\) of special educators who completed fewer than 10 weeks of student teaching left the field after their first year and 16.3% \((n = 8)\) moved to another teaching job. Connelly and Graham (2009) found that longer student teaching experiences had a strong effect on the probability that new special education teachers would continue teaching beyond one year, and that no other aspects of teacher preparation impacted attrition.

Research also has examined reasons why educators choose to stay in the teaching field. Bennett, Brown, Kirby-Smith, and Severson (2013) conducted a phenomenological study of four teachers with special and general education experience from Title I and non-Title I elementary schools in a southeastern state in the United States. Interviews were conducted with two teachers with careers of over 20 years and two teachers with fewer than three years of experience to gain insight into the factors that influence longevity in the profession. Researchers noted that all participants demonstrated a passion for teaching through their comments and expressions. Experienced teachers credited the longevity of
their careers to a love of teaching and children, a belief that teaching was their calling, a sense of purpose in helping students become good citizens, and valued family time in the summer. Novice teachers identified the support of administrators and colleagues, and the growth of their students as reasons they intended to continue teaching.

Prather-Jones (2011) also conducted a qualitative study that focused on the reasons why teachers remain in the field. Participants, who consisted of 13 special educators in a metropolitan area of a midwestern state in the United States, taught students with emotional and behavioral disorders at elementary, middle, and high school levels in inclusion, resource, and self-contained settings. Through interviews with participants, who had between 7 and 28 years of experience, Prather-Jones found that administrative and collegial support, particularly during participants’ initial years in the profession, were influential factors in their career choices. Participants defined administrative support as the respect and appreciation of principals and assistant principals, who enforced consequences for students and aided in developing collegial relationships with other educators. Findings of this study indicated that strong support is crucial to teacher retention. Research also shows that teacher turnover affects student achievement.

**Impact on Student Achievement**

Ronfeldt et al. (2013) examined the effects of teacher turnover on student achievement. In an analysis of achievement test score data of 850,000 New York City students in grades 4 and 5 over eight years, the researchers found that achievement levels in English language arts and mathematics were impacted by teacher turnover. Students in grade levels with 100% turnover from one school year to the next had lower test scores by 7.4% to
9.6% of a standard deviation in math and by 6.0% to 8.3% of a standard deviation in English language arts as compared to grade levels with no turnover at all. Student achievement was impacted more significantly by teacher turnover in schools with larger populations of low-achieving and black students.

Kraft, Marinell, and Yee (2016) studied the relationship between school organizational contexts, teacher turnover, and student achievement. In a quantitative study of existing data from five school years, the researchers sought to determine if strengthening school organizational contexts would decrease teacher turnover and increase student achievement. They analyzed (a) New York City human resources data of over 16,000 teachers, (b) student assessment data of approximately 334,000 students in grades 6 through 8, (c) school administrative data on characteristics of 278 middle schools, and (d) more than 31,000 teacher responses to the annual New York City Department of Education School Survey. Kraft et al. stated that improvements in school leadership were associated with increased teacher retention. Findings indicated that improvements in academic expectations, teacher relationships, and school safety were associated with decreased teacher turnover. Kraft et al. also reported that improvements in school safety and increased academic expectations were related to increased student achievement. Notably, only two studies were located that directly assessed student achievement in relation to teacher retention, indicating a lack of research in this area.

**Effective Preparation Programs for Special Education Teachers**

Research indicates that comprehensive preparation is also essential to the retention of special educators in the teaching profession (Brownell & Sindelar, 2016; Sweigart & Collins,
Studies have shown that different types of teacher preparation programs have resulted in varying levels of preparation and retention (Flower, McKenna, & Haring, 2017; Zhang & Zeller, 2016). Researchers have identified several areas in which thorough preparation may contribute to the retention of novice special educators, including behavior and classroom management, collaboration and co-teaching, and case management (Freeman, Simonsen, Briere, & MacSuga-Gage, 2014; Kamens, 2004; Oliver & Reschly, 2010; Ricci, Zetlin, & Osipova, 2017; Whitaker, 2003).

**Types of Teacher Preparation Programs**

Zhang and Zeller (2016) conducted a mixed methods study in which they examined the relationship between teacher retention and type of teacher preparation. In addition to traditional university teacher preparation programs for undergraduate and graduate students, they identified lateral entry alternative licensure programs in which candidates began teaching positions while they completed course requirements within a designated period of time, and special alternative licensure programs that recruited, prepared, and supported non-education majors as they transitioned into teaching careers. In this study, 20 doctoral students at a university in North Carolina interviewed 60 first- and second-year teachers who earned their certification through three different pathways. The novice teachers, who worked in urban, suburban, and rural settings in North Carolina, participated in interviews in the academic year 2003-2004. Over the next several years, follow-ups were conducted to determine the number of participants who remained in the teaching profession to calculate retention percentages. After seven years, 63.33% ($n = 38$) of the original 60 teachers had continued teaching, including 86.36% ($n = 19$) from the traditional preparation program, 35%
(n = 7) from the lateral entry alternative route, and 66.67% (n = 12) from the special alternative licensure program. Zhang and Zeller found that teachers who earned their credential through traditional preparation programs were most likely to remain in the profession after seven years. Teachers who became certified through lateral entry and alternative programs not only were less likely to continue teaching, but also reported feeling less prepared to teach and experienced greater challenges in their careers. Challenges faced by new teachers include behavior and classroom management.

**Behavior and Classroom Management**

Behavior and classroom management are crucial elements of teacher preparation; poor management contributes to teacher attrition (Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014). Behavior management has become progressively more important in teacher preparation due to the increased time students with disabilities spend in general education settings (Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010). Classroom management skills are essential components of the success of novice teachers and student achievement (Freeman et al., 2014). Additionally, the use of evidence-based classroom management practices has been found to be an important contributor to the improvement of student behavior and academic achievement (Flower et al., 2017).

Flower et al. (2017) examined the behavior and classroom management content of preservice general and special education teacher preparation programs. In a quantitative study of traditional and alternative certification programs for general and special education teachers in a large southwestern state of the United States, 74 program coordinators from participating institutions completed surveys in which they indicated the behavioral concepts,
skills, terms, and strategies that were addressed in their teacher preparation program. They also identified required and elective course titles and fieldwork experiences relevant to classroom behavior and management.

Flower et al. (2017) found that 87% of programs addressed universal methods, which included basic classroom management skills such as routines, rules, student praise, and parent communication. Strategies to increase appropriate behavior were provided by 57.59% of programs overall and 100% of university special education programs. These strategies included behavior-specific feedback, praise, and choice. Reductive strategies, including error correction, were taught in 52% of all programs; university special education programs were at the highest level of 70.8%, and alternate certification programs for general educators were the lowest at 38.76%. Approximately 54% of all programs addressed behavioral assessment, including over 78% of university special education programs. Approximately 62% of programs surveyed indicated specific courses or fieldwork experiences pertaining to behavior and classroom management, ranging from 58% of alternative general education certification programs to 89% of university special education programs. Overall, university special education programs provided the most extensive education in behavior and classroom management, while alternative certification programs for general education teachers provided the least amount of training in this area.

In a qualitative study examining the classroom management training requirements for pre-service teachers, Freeman et al. (2014) conducted a review of the state policies of all 50 states and Washington, DC, as well as undergraduate course catalogs and course materials related to preservice teacher preparation in classroom management. They found that 49
states required special education teacher preparation programs to provide instruction in classroom management and 34 states required special education teacher preparation programs to provide instruction on research-based practices.

Freeman et al. (2014) also reviewed online course catalogs of a random sample of 18% ($n = 349$) of all teacher preparation programs in the United States ($n = 1,940$). They then requested course materials related to classroom management from these programs. Participants consisted of 32 elementary, 32 secondary, and 14 special education programs. Freeman et al. reported that 74% of reviewed teacher preparation programs of all types offered a course on classroom management. They found that 78.6% of special education teacher preparation programs included evidence-based practices. Classroom management content in elementary preparation programs was more frequently distributed among numerous courses, while special education programs were more likely to present this content within one or two courses focused on classroom management. Aspects of classroom management that appeared most frequently in review of course syllabi and materials were strategies to increase desired behaviors, decrease inappropriate behaviors, and maximize structure.

Freeman et al. (2014) found that, although most states required classroom management training in teacher preparation programs, evidence-based practices were not emphasized, and research-based classroom management practices often were not reflected in course materials. They found that requirements were greater in special education teacher preparation programs than in elementary and secondary general education programs. Alternative certification programs were found to be less comprehensive. They also found
that requirements were more comprehensive in states that required National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) accreditation than in states that did not. Freeman et al. concluded that training in classroom management for preservice teachers may be inadequate due to lack of exposure to content.

Oliver and Reschly (2010) also examined the preparation of special education teachers in the area of behavior and classroom management. They reviewed the course syllabi submitted by college deans of 26 special education teacher preparation programs in a large midwestern state in the United States to determine if coursework included essential components of classroom and behavior management. These critical components of programs sought by researchers were structured environment, active supervision and student engagement, schoolwide behavioral expectations, classroom rules and routines, encouragement of appropriate behavior, and behavior reduction strategies. The syllabi were rated using a rubric developed by the researchers to identify which components were present and the degree of implementation of components in each program.

Oliver and Reschly (2010) found great differences between programs. They determined that 27% \((n = 7)\) of programs reviewed offered a full course on classroom management, while 73% \((n = 19)\) included behavior and classroom management content within other courses. They found that 96% \((n = 25)\) of university programs provided evidence in their syllabi of preparation in behavior reduction strategies and 58% \((n = 15)\) showed substantial evidence of encouragement of appropriate behavior. Results also indicated that more than half of teacher preparation programs provided no evidence in their syllabi of preparation in the areas of active supervision and student engagement, structured
environment, and schoolwide behavioral expectations. In addition to behavior and classroom management, comprehensive training in collaboration and co-teaching may contribute to improved teacher retention.

**Collaboration and Co-Teaching**

The instruction of students with disabilities within an inclusion setting has become increasingly common. In the co-teaching model, academic content is delivered by two or more teachers to students with and without disabilities in a general education classroom (Jackson, Willis, Giles, Lastrapes, & Mooney, 2017). With the implementation of this service delivery model, a growing population of students with disabilities accesses academic instruction in the general education setting while receiving appropriate supports from special educators (Brownell, et al., 2010; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017). Thorough preparation of teachers includes training in co-teaching techniques and collaboration with other educational professionals (Ricci et al., 2017).

Ricci et al. (2017) conducted research on the perceptions and growth of preservice special education teachers who participated in fieldwork experiences focused on collaboration and co-teaching in urban schools. Participants in this mixed methods study consisted of 57 female graduate students enrolled in a special education certification program at a large, urban university in California. Instruments included surveys and open-ended written reflections completed by participants about their experiences with assigned co-teachers at the midpoint and conclusion of their 10-week-long fieldwork placements, and surveys rating the skills of the preservice teachers completed by university supervisors.
Results revealed that participants rated the collaboration participation of both themselves and their co-teachers significantly higher at the end of the fieldwork placement than at the midpoint (Ricci et al., 2017). Findings also revealed a significant difference in the preservice teachers’ perceptions about collaboration at the end of the fieldwork compared to the midpoint. Surveys completed by university supervisors reported increased competence of preservice special education teachers in co-teaching and collaboration. The majority of participants stated that their fieldwork experiences in collaboration and co-teaching contributed to their growth as teachers. Overall positive open-ended comments of 77% ($n = 44$) of participants indicated that a positive relationship with their co-teaching partners contributed to their success in the classroom. Additional participant comments identified equality with their co-teachers as beneficial in their partnerships, which enabled them to focus on the needs of their students. Participants also identified several challenges of co-teaching in their reflective comments including adjustment to one another’s personalities, difficulty reaching compromise with their co-teachers, and a lack of planning time. In addition to co-teaching and collaboration, extensive training in special education case management may benefit teacher retention.

**Case Management**

Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), which are the foundation on which specialized instruction is created, are intended to guide instructional practice for students with disabilities (Kamens, 2004). Special educators, particularly novice teachers, frequently report feeling overwhelmed by non-instructional responsibilities such as paperwork and case management (Bettini et al., 2017; Cancio et al., 2018; Whitaker, 2003). Explicit instruction on the
accurate and detailed writing of IEPs and related documents is a critical part of thorough preparation of special education teachers (Kamens, 2004). Special educators often serve as not only teachers of students with disabilities but also case managers with the primary responsibilities of assessing students and developing IEPs (Truity, 2017). Case management duties also include coordinating services with general education teachers and related service providers, and attending meetings with teachers, administrators, providers, and families (Council for Exceptional Children, 2019; Kamens, 2004).

In a quantitative study conducted to examine the perceptions of first-year special education teachers, Whitaker (2003) surveyed 156 special educators from South Carolina after their first year of teaching. Participants indicated in which of eight areas they needed the greatest level of assistance during their first year of teaching. They also specified in which areas they received the most help and from whom they received assistance. Results showed participants needed the most assistance in the area of system information related to special education, which included information about policies, paperwork, procedures, guidelines, and expectations in the special education program. Participants stated they needed more help in this area than in emotional support, materials, curriculum/instruction, discipline, and management. It was also in the area of special education systems information that participants reported receiving the least amount of help from others. They identified fellow special education teachers as the greatest source of assistance. They reported less assistance received from school administrators and assigned mentors, and they reported the lowest level of assistance received from special education administrators and general
education teachers. The findings of this study indicated that case management was an area in which novice special education teachers benefited from access to a network of support.

Kamens (2004) conducted a project in which 19 undergraduate students enrolled in a dual certification program for elementary and special education wrote IEP goals and objectives based on themselves as students. The purpose of the project was to teach preservice teachers how to write IEPs. The third-year college students, who had seen IEPs in previous classes and had minimal experience writing goals and objectives based on student assessment data, received instruction on writing observable, measurable, realistic, achievable goals in the appropriate format. Upon completion of the project, students completed open-ended questionnaires about the activity. Themes that emerged included the importance of individualizing goals and objectives, focusing on students’ strengths, and collaborating with other teachers and related service providers to write thorough IEPs. Students also identified the time-consuming and detailed nature of writing IEPs as a challenge.

In summary, areas of teacher preparation that special educators reportedly felt unprepared for once they began teaching included case management, co-teaching and collaboration, and behavior and classroom management. Research also revealed that teachers reported varying levels of preparation depending on the type of preparation program they completed. Aspects of effective preparation of teachers are rooted in constructs of social cognitive theory.

**Social Cognitive Theory**

Social cognitive theory was developed by Bandura in 1986 as an extension of his social learning theory of the 1960s (Bandura, 1986; Boston University School of Public
According to Bandura (1977b), “Social learning theory approaches the explanation of human behavior in terms of a continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental determinants” (p. vii). Within this interaction, people are neither powerless nor free agents, rather, they are determinants of one another (Bandura, 1977b). Social learning theory served as the starting point for social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2019).

Social cognitive theory, which is founded on an agentic perspective, states that one can intentionally produce desired effects by one’s behavior (Bandura, 2018). It posits that learning occurs in a social context with interaction between an individual and his or her behavior and environment (Bandura, 1986, 2018). It emphasizes social influence, internal and external social reinforcement, and the role of one’s past experiences in the likelihood of an occurrence of a behavior. A purpose of social cognitive theory is to explain how an individual regulates behavior through control and reinforcement to achieve goal-directed behavior that can be maintained over time (Bandura, 1986).

According to Bandura (1991), behavior is motivated and regulated by self-influence, a mechanism which operates through three main functions. Bandura (1991) stated, “These include self-monitoring of one's behavior, its determinants, and its effects; judgment of one's behavior in relation to personal standards and environmental circumstances; and affective self-reaction” (p. 248).

Social cognitive theory consists of six constructs, the first five of which were developed as part of social learning theory: reciprocal determinism, behavior capacity, observational learning, reinforcements, expectations, and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986).
Self-efficacy “plays a central role in the exercise of personal agency by its strong impact on thought, affect, motivation, and action” (Bandura, 1991, p. 248).

Social cognitive theory emphasizes the interaction between an individual, his or her behavior and the environment, and one’s ability to react to and affect the environment (Bembenuity, White, & DiBenedetto, 2016). Social cognitive theory relates to teacher preparation through the construct of self-regulated learning, the process by which learners actively use cognition, behavior, and affect to achieve their goals (Bembenuity, White, & Velez, 2015).

Bandura (1993) stated that individuals learn by observing others in social contexts. In the apprenticeship model of student teaching, students in teacher preparation programs observe experienced teachers, engage in guided practice, and pursue independent practice through approximations of practice, which refer to how pre-service teachers apply their skills as they learn (Grossman, 2018).

When they reach self-regulation, the level at which learners can perform a task independently of a model, they are able to adapt their techniques as needed by the context (Bembenuity et al., 2016). Self-regulated learning is a way in which social cognitive theory applies to the preparation of future teachers (Bembenuity et al., 2015). Self-efficacy also relates to teacher preparation as a construct of social cognitive theory.

**Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy contributes to cognitive development and functioning (Bandura, 1993). This construct, which refers to an individual’s degree of confidence in his or her own ability to perform a behavior successfully, is influenced by specific capabilities, and individual and
environmental factors (Bandura, 1997a). Self-efficacy, which is context-dependent, involves the judgment of one’s capabilities to accomplish tasks rather than personal qualities such as physical or psychological characteristics (Zimmerman, 1995). Self-efficacy, which influences how people feel, think, behave, and motivate themselves, affects human functioning through four major psychological processes: cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection (Bandura, 1993, 1994, 1995).

Cognitive processes impacted by self-efficacy include the setting of and commitment to reaching personal goals, and the visualization of positive scenarios (Bandura, 1994). They also include problem solving skills, inferential thinking, and the prediction of possible outcomes of various courses of action (Bandura, 1997b). Bandura (1994) stated, “Those who maintain a resilient sense of efficacy set themselves challenging goals and use good analytic thinking which pays off in performance accomplishments” (p. 73).

Self-efficacy also impacts one’s motivational processes. According to Bandura (1995), “Efficacy beliefs contribute to motivation in several ways: they determine the goals people set for themselves; how much effort they expend; how long they persevere in the face of difficulties; and their resilience to failures” (p. 8). The setting of specific, ambitious goals can increase and sustain one’s motivation, and perseverance contributes to success (Bandura, 1994).

Self-efficacy influences one’s affective processes, which refer to one’s ability to cope with challenging situations, through action, thought, and affect (Bandura, 1997b). Bandura (1995) noted, “People’s beliefs in their coping abilities affect how much stress and depression they experience in threatening or difficult situations, as well as their level of
motivation” (p. 8). He stated that one’s sense of self-efficacy to exercise control over stressful situations affects one’s response to stress. People who have a poorer sense of self-efficacy dwell on their inability to cope with challenges, thus impairing their functioning, whereas people with a stronger sense of self-efficacy approach such situations more boldly and less fearfully (Bandura, 1994, 1995).

Selection processes are influenced by self-efficacy. Bandura (1994, 1995) posited that people select activities, environments, and careers that they believe they are capable of handling, avoiding those that they perceive as beyond their abilities. He stated, “The higher the level of people’s perceived self-efficacy the wider the range of career options they seriously consider, the greater their interest in them, and the better they prepare themselves educationally . . . and the greater is their success” (Bandura, 1995, p. 76).

Strong self-efficacy is created and reinforced through four main sources: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and physiological and emotional states (Bandura, 1977a, 1995, 1997b). The strengthening of self-efficacy through mastery experiences, which refer to performance accomplishments, involves “acquiring the cognitive, behavioral, and self-regulatory tools for creating and executing appropriate courses of action to manage ever-changing life circumstances” (Bandura, 1995, p. 3). Vicarious experiences contribute to self-efficacy through modeling; when one observes the success of a person who is considered similar to oneself, one’s belief that they can accomplish comparable tasks increases (Bandura, 1995).

Self-efficacy also is strengthened through social persuasion. When one is persuaded verbally of their capabilities by people with significant roles, one is likely to demonstrate the
effort to master a task if it is within realistic reach (Bandura, 1995, 1997b). One’s sense of self-efficacy is more easily sustained by the verbal persuasion of others; when others convey doubts, one is more likely to give up or avoid tasks (Bandura, 1995).

In addition, self-efficacy is influenced by physiological and emotional states. People judge their capabilities based partly on their reactions to stress, tension, fatigue, pain, and mood. Bandura stated that self-efficacy can be altered by improving one’s physical status, stress level, and emotional predisposition (Bandura, 1995, 1997b).

Bandura (1997a) delineated the differences between individuals with high and low senses of self-efficacy. Individuals with a perceived strong sense of self-efficacy set higher goals and approach challenging tasks more readily and with greater optimism and commitment (Bandura, 1991; Bandura, 1997a). When unsuccessful, they are more likely to blame their failures on lack of skill or insufficient effort, and they recover their confidence more quickly (Bandura, 1997a). Conversely, individuals with a low sense of self-efficacy demonstrate task avoidance and self-doubt, and dwell on obstacles and adverse outcomes (Bandura, 1994). They blame failures on their own inadequacies and are more likely to experience stress, anxiety, and depression (Bandura, 1997a).

A strong sense of self-efficacy is beneficial to one’s well-being and personal accomplishments (Bandura, 1994; Evans, 1989). Self-efficacy is developed over the course of one’s lifetime by the influence of and experiences with family, peers, schools, adolescence, and occupations (Bandura, 1994). Teaching and learning are areas in which self-efficacy plays a significant role.
According to Bandura (1997a), individuals have a stronger incentive to act when they believe their actions will be effective. Bandura (1993) stated that teachers’ efficacy beliefs affect the learning environments they create and their students’ level of achievement. He reported that teachers with a low sense of self-efficacy are more likely to become discouraged by challenging student behavior and low achievement, and therefore are more likely to demonstrate a weak commitment to instruction (Bandura, 1993).

**Self-Efficacy of Special Education Teachers**

Nationally, 13% of students receive special education services. Of these students, 34% qualify for services under the criteria for Specific Learning Disability (McFarland et al., 2018). Inclusion in the general classroom is considered the current best practice for the instruction of students with disabilities (Gotshall & Stefanou, 2011). However, it is challenging for teachers of low-achieving students to develop a high sense of self-efficacy (Wang, Tan, Li, Tan, & Lim, 2017). Understanding how teachers of students with disabilities develop a high sense of self-efficacy is important in the preparation and retention of special education teachers (Lee et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2017).

Gibson and Dembo (1984) conducted a mixed methods study in which they examined the relationship between teacher efficacy and observable teacher behavior, and through which they developed the Teacher Efficacy Scale. In the first phase of this study, 208 elementary teachers in California with a range of experience from 1 to 39 years completed the Teacher Efficacy Scale. In the second phase, 55 teachers enrolled in graduate courses in California completed the Teacher Efficacy Scale and a second instrument in which they were asked to select 10 out of 20 listed variables that contributed most to students’ success or
failure. In the third phase, a subsample of the original 208 teachers participated in classroom observations, the focus of which was the relationship between teacher efficacy and teacher behaviors in the classroom. The video recorded observations of eight teachers, including four with high self-efficacy and four with low self-efficacy, were coded for the quality of student responses and nature of teacher feedback.

Gibson and Dembo (1984) found a significant difference in the amount of time teachers with low and high self-efficacy spent on small group instruction, \( t(6) = 2.23, p < .05 \). Teachers with high self-efficacy devoted twice as much time to whole class instruction as the teachers with low self-efficacy, who spent nearly half of their observed time (\( M = 214.5 \) min) in small groups. Conversely, teachers with high self-efficacy spent 28% of their observed time (\( M = 124.8 \)) on small group instruction. During small group instruction, teachers who had high self-efficacy were observed to answer questions, redirect students, and maintain more on-task behavior than the low-efficacy teachers, who appeared flustered if small group routines were interrupted. Gibson and Dembo also reported that teachers with high self-efficacy achieved more on-task student behavior, provided less criticism to students, and were more likely to persist until students gave correct responses.

Coladarci and Breton (1997) conducted a quantitative study in which they modified the Teacher Efficacy Scale (Gibson & Dembo, 1984) for use with special education resource teachers. The purpose of their study was to examine the relationship between teacher efficacy and the frequency and utility of instructional supervision received by special education teachers. Participants, who consisted of 580 special education resource teachers from Maine with an average of 6 to 10 years of experience, answered 30 survey questions
about self-efficacy and rated the frequency and usefulness of the supervision they received. Supervision was specified as formal observations of lessons and informal exchanges between a teacher and supervisor about instructional practices.

Using a six-point Likert-type scale, Coladarci and Breton (1997) determined a mean response of 3.5 represented the demarcation between low and high efficacy. A mean of 4.25 ($SD = .45$) was obtained, with a range of 2.33 to 5.50. They acknowledged difficulty in appraising the mean without an accepted standard by which to judge the level of teacher efficacy, but stated that the average participant expressed self-efficacy in more items than not. They found that perceived utility of supervision positively impacted the self-efficacy of special education teachers. They reported that instructional supervision, in the form of observations, assistance, monitoring, and constructive feedback by administrators such as principals and special education supervisors or directors, contributed to higher self-efficacy in special education teachers who perceived these activities as useful. Results indicated that the frequency of supervision did not contribute to teachers’ self-efficacy. A higher sense of self-efficacy was reported by teachers who indicated greater job satisfaction, and older participants indicated slightly higher self-efficacy. These elements of supervision relate to verbal persuasion and approximation of mastery (Bandura, 1977a).

Teacher efficacy also was studied by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001). In a quantitative study of 410 pre-service and in-service teachers across all grade levels from Ohio and Virginia, the researchers sought insight into teachers’ sense of self-efficacy in student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management. In this study, the researchers developed and tested the Ohio State Teacher Efficacy Scale, which was later
renamed the Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy Scale (Tschannen-Moran, 2018). The 24-item scale consisted of eight items each in the subscales of instruction, management, and engagement. Reliabilities were 0.91 for instruction, 0.90 for management, and 0.87 for engagement; intercorrelations between the subscales were 0.60, 0.70, and 0.58, respectively ($p < 0.001$). Additionally, the means for the three subscales ranged from 6.71 to 7.27.

Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001) found that teacher efficacy was negatively related to pupil control ideology; teachers with a greater sense of their own efficacy were less custodial in their attitudes toward students ($r = -0.25, p < 0.01$). Findings also indicated that teacher efficacy was significantly negatively related to work alienation, the extent to which individuals fail to experience intrinsic pride or meaning in their work ($r = -0.31, p < 0.01$).

Wang et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study in which they used semi-structured interviews to investigate sources of teacher efficacy. Participants consisted of five teachers with high self-efficacy and four with low self-efficacy, all of whom worked with low-performing students in Singapore. Participants had previously completed the Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale (Tschannen-Moran, 2018) as part of a larger, mixed methods study on teacher efficacy in secondary schools in Singapore. Themes that emerged reflected the four sources of self-efficacy identified by Bandura: (a) mastery experiences, (b) verbal persuasion, (c) vicarious experience, and (d) physiological and emotional arousal (1977a, 1994). Wang et al. identified three additional sources of high self-efficacy: (a) teachers’ knowledge of students, (b) rapport with students, and (c) previous work experiences.

Wang et al. (2017) reported that participants with high self-efficacy believed that they had spent more time than their colleagues becoming acquainted with their students and
learning about the challenges their families faced that made learning difficult. Participants also reported an emphasis on positive rapport with students, which enabled continued learning despite tension resulting from correction. In addition, high-efficacy participants revealed that sharing information and stories about their previous work experience, particularly in other occupations, provided a real-life context that increased student engagement.

The Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy Scale (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001; Tschannen-Moran, 2018) served as the framework for Dawson and Scott’s (2013) Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale. Dawson and Scott developed this scale to measure the self-efficacy of special education teachers in the areas of instruction, professionalism, teacher support, classroom management, and related duties. The final version of the scale was tested in a quantitative study with a sample of 431 pre-service and in-service teachers from the midwest, south, and mountain west regions of the United States. Results indicated that participants demonstrated a stronger sense of self-efficacy in some dimensions, such as teacher professionalism and teacher support, than in other areas such as classroom management and related duties.

Dawson and Scott reported that years of teaching experience positively impacted self-efficacy of special educators in the area of teacher support ($\beta = .26, p < .008$), which referred to teachers’ ability to establish positive relationships with students with disabilities. They also found that the amount of coursework in special education was a significant positive predictor of self-efficacy in both pre-service and in-service special education teachers ($\beta = .23, p < .008$), while years of experience in inclusive settings did not predict self-efficacy.
Research also has been conducted regarding the self-efficacy of pre-service special educators. In a quantitative study involving 92 pre-service special education teachers enrolled in a teacher preparation program at a California university, Lee et al. (2011) focused on perils to self-efficacy and quality of support received by pre-service teachers. Participants completed surveys consisting of 32 items using a six-point Likert-type scale about their perceptions of teacher efficacy, level of knowledge, and perceived level of support from others.

Lee et al. (2011) stated that special education intern teachers reported higher levels of personal teaching efficacy ($M = 2.2$, $SD = 0.63$), which refers to the level of teacher confidence in one’s ability to promote student learning, than general teaching efficacy ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.89$), which refers to the level of teacher confidence about the power of teaching (Gibson & Dembo, 1984). Participants reported the highest level of support from university intern supervisors ($M = 5.47$, $SD = 1.57$) and university intern programs ($M = 5.42$, $SD = 1.47$) as their greatest sources of support. Participants perceived a low level of support from school districts ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.81$) and students’ families ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.50$). A correlational analysis showed that personal teacher efficacy was related to the level of supports from school districts and mentor teachers. They also reported that pre-service teachers’ confidence in their knowledge and skills, including content knowledge, behavior management, and assessment, was related to their perceived sources of support. In addition, Lee et al. identified perils to the self-efficacy of pre-service teachers as lack of support from school districts, lack of teaching resources, and heavy workloads.
Lancaster and Bain (2010) also conducted research on the self-efficacy of pre-service teachers. The purpose of their study was to determine if enrollment in an inclusive education class impacted self-efficacy, and if participation in an applied field experience resulted in higher self-efficacy. A total of 36 students in the second year of an undergraduate elementary teacher preparation program at two Australian universities participated in this quantitative study. All participants were registered in a 13-week required course on inclusive education; participants at one university also were required to complete 11 hours of related field work. Participants completed efficacy questionnaires at the beginning and the conclusion of the course and field work.

Lancaster and Bain (2010) found statistically significant differences for occasion, pre- and post-test, $F(1, 34) = 36.33; p < 0.0001$. They found no statistically significant differences for condition on post-test scores $F(1, 34) = 0.533; p = 0.47$. The researchers found that participation in the inclusive education course contributed to higher levels of self-efficacy among pre-service special education teachers; however, participation in the field work experience did not impact self-efficacy significantly.

**Summary**

The research summarized in this chapter addressed the retention of special education teachers, the impact on student achievement, effective preparation programs for special education teachers, and the self-efficacy of special educators. This chapter also presented an explanation of the theoretical framework of social cognitive theory and the construct of self-efficacy.
While studies have indicated that poor retention of special education teachers is a significant issue that adversely impacts student achievement in urban schools (Kraft et al., 2016; Ronfeldt et al., 2013), researchers have identified strong preparation and self-efficacy as positive contributors to the retention of teachers (Lee et al., 2011; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Effective preparation programs for special education teachers include an emphasis on behavior and classroom management (Flower et al., 2017; Freeman et al., 2014), co-teaching and collaboration (Ricci et al., 2017), and case management (Kamens, 2004; Whitaker, 2003).

Minimal research exists about the preparation and self-efficacy of special education teachers in urban schools. As a result, this researcher sought information and insight about the preparation and experiences of participants through surveys, interviews, and reflective questions. This study was informed by the literature that there is a need to learn more about how the preparation and support of urban special educators may lead to strong self-efficacy, improved retention, and, ultimately, increased student achievement.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purposes of this study were to investigate special education teachers’ perceptions of their preparedness and self-efficacy to teach students with learning disabilities, and to gain insight into the experiences they identified as rewarding and challenging. This chapter describes the methodology used to conduct this research study. This chapter contains a biography of the researcher followed by a description of the setting, participants, and sampling procedures. It also includes the research questions and design, and a description of each instrument. A description and justification of the data analysis is followed by a review of the data collection procedures. Lastly, this chapter addresses the concepts of trustworthiness and includes a statement of ethics.

Researcher Biography

Observations often are influenced by personal bias because of the experiences and beliefs of observers. The design of some studies can increase the potential for researcher bias to occur (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). In an attempt to reveal any biases that could impact the interview process and data analysis, a biography of the researcher is provided.

This researcher has been a special education teacher in an urban setting for eight years. Her path to special education was driven primarily by a desire to work with students who needed the greatest level of assistance as well as by her experiences with family members who received special education services.

After student teaching in a city in the Northeast United States, this researcher was committed to the goal of obtaining a position in an urban setting. She experienced great satisfaction working where she believed the needs of the students were the greatest. The
researcher was also interested in the facets of diversity that she found lacking in her own educational experience.

While in graduate school for her master’s degree in elementary education, this researcher developed an interest in someday working in higher education. She found her experiences in her teacher preparation program fulfilling and learned of the important role of education programs in developing enthusiastic learners into exemplary teachers.

When she began her first contracted position as a special education teacher in a high school life skills program, this researcher struggled to balance teaching responsibilities with case management work. Although she learned a great deal about pedagogy in her teacher preparation program, she felt unprepared to manage student behaviors and fulfill special education case management duties such as conducting assessments, writing IEPs, and completing evaluation and progress reports.

For these reasons, this researcher focused her research on special education teachers in urban public schools, their perception of their preparedness to teach, and their perceptions of self-efficacy in their teaching positions. This topic reflects her interest in teacher preparation and retention, and her commitment to high quality education for students with disabilities in urban settings.

**Description of Setting, Participants, and Sampling Procedures**

This research study took place in one urban school district in Connecticut in 2019. This district was selected as a sample of convenience (Gall et al., 2003). The district was inclusive of the site of employment of this researcher but did not include any individuals directly supervised by the researcher. This city was an appropriate choice due to its
population of approximately 19,000 students, 1,600 teachers, and occupancy of 31 school buildings (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2018). School websites, internal school district data, and the assistance of district and building administrators were used to identify potential participants from the approximately 215 special education teachers (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2018). A comparison of the demographic data for the research site and the state is included in Table 1.

Table 1

Comparison of Demographic Information of Prospective Research Site and State Averages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Sample (%)</th>
<th>State (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minority student population</td>
<td>76.4</td>
<td>36.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 11-12 students at benchmark on at least one college readiness exam</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>43.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation rate</td>
<td>73.3</td>
<td>87.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with disabilities</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English learners</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligible for free or reduced-price meals</td>
<td>68.3</td>
<td>35.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronic absenteeism rate</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Using purposive sampling (Gall et al., 2003), it was the goal of this researcher to invite the district-wide population of approximately 215 special education teachers to
complete the demographic survey and Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013). Permission was received from the superintendent (Appendix A) and 29 out of 31 school principals in the district (Appendix B) after three rounds of contact with administrators, allowing this researcher to invite 178 special education teachers to participate in the study. Signed teacher consent letters (Appendix C) and completed demographic surveys (Appendix D) and Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scales (Appendices E and F) were received from 34 teachers after three follow up reminders. Demographic characteristics of these participants are shown in Table 2.
Table 2

Demographic Characteristics of Participants in Demographic Survey and Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highest Degree</th>
<th>Years of Teaching</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>&lt; 2</td>
<td>2-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth Year</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years of Teaching</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Years of Teaching</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more ethnicities</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A purposeful sample of six teachers was selected from the original sample of 34 participants based on the following criteria: (a) five or fewer years of experience teaching special education; (b) pre-service or in-service experience working with students with learning disabilities in inclusion, co-taught, or resource room settings; and (c) scores among the highest on the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013). Participants with five or fewer years of experience were sought for their strong recollection of recent teacher preparation experiences. Teachers with this level of experience were also sought because they were within the critical first five years of teaching when half of urban educators leave the profession (Bland et al., 2014). Teachers of learning disabled students were the focus of this study because 40% of the students who receive special education services in this district qualified for services with a primary disability of Specific Learning Disability (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2018). This percentage constituted the largest segment of the district-wide population of students with disabilities (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2018). The sample was also selected based on a balanced representation of participants’ pre-service and in-service experiences in elementary, middle, and high school grade levels.

Additional teachers were invited to participate when three from the original group declined. Eleven teachers altogether were invited to participate in the interviews and open-ended reflective prompts in order to attain six participants. Four teachers total declined to participate, and one did not respond. Interviews took place after school at the school of either the participant or researcher.
Five of the six participants taught continuously since completing their teacher certification programs; one participant had gaps in her teaching career due to raising her children. Signed consent letters (Appendix G) were received from these teachers, each one of whom comprised one case, for participation in semi-structured interviews (Appendix H) and open-ended reflective prompts (Appendix I).

Demographic characteristics of the six teachers who participated in the interviews and open-ended reflective prompts are shown in Table 3.
Table 3

*Demographic Characteristics of Participants in Interviews and Open-Ended Reflective Prompts*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Years of Teaching</th>
<th>Current Grade Levels</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Highest Degree</th>
<th>Perception of Preparedness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>2-5</td>
<td>K-1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Very</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>2-5</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Slightly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>2-5</td>
<td>K-1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Slightly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>&lt;2</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Very</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allison</td>
<td>2-5</td>
<td>4-8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Moderately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krista</td>
<td>2-5</td>
<td>2-3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Sixth Year</td>
<td>Very</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Perception of Preparedness refers to the following question on demographic survey: “Evaluate the degree to which you felt prepared to teach students with learning disabilities upon the completion of your teacher certification program.”

**Research Questions**

This qualitative study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do urban special education teachers experience their teaching responsibilities in relation to their expectations based on their teacher preparation program experiences?

2. How do urban special education teachers perceive their self-efficacy in their current position?

3. What do special education teachers identify as rewards and challenges that they experience in an urban school district?
Description of the Research Design

This study utilized a multiple case study qualitative research design. The purpose of a case study is to investigate a phenomenon in depth within a real-life context (Yin, 2009). A case study also is used to gain perspective into a problem or issue through analysis of the case (Creswell, 2016). This case study involved special education teachers who worked primarily with students with learning disabilities in elementary, middle, and high schools in one urban school district. Each case, which consisted of one special education teacher, was bound by geographical area and special education classroom setting (i.e., inclusion, co-taught, resource, and self-contained). The case study research included data collected from the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013), a demographic survey, semi-structured interviews, and responses to two open-ended reflective prompts.

Instrumentation

Data were collected using a demographic survey, the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013), semi-structured interview questions about teachers’ perceptions and experiences, and open-ended reflective prompts about teachers’ perceptions and experiences. The goal of this research was to gather information about the lived experiences and resulting perceptions of urban special education teachers.

Demographic Survey

Participants initially completed a demographic survey (see Appendix D) consisting of 10 questions about their level of education, years of teaching, and the grade levels, types of school districts, and special education settings in which they were experienced. They also
were asked about the type of district in which they student taught and the year in which they completed their teacher certification program. Participants were asked to indicate on a 5-point Likert-type scale to what degree they felt prepared to teach students with learning disabilities upon the completion of their teacher certification program. Participants also were asked to indicate their gender and ethnicity. The expected completion time for the demographic survey was approximately 10-15 minutes.

**Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale**

All participants were asked to complete the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013; see Appendix E), consisting of 19 questions about their perceptions of their self-efficacy in the areas of instruction (five items), professionalism (five items), teacher support (three items), classroom management (three items), and related duties (three items). Participants indicated their level of self-efficacy for each item using a Likert-type scale ranging from one (“Certain I cannot do”) to nine (“Certain I can do”). Responses of one or two indicated a participant’s lack of strategies or lack of belief that they could enhance a situation, while responses of eight or nine indicated a strong belief in a participant’s ability to handle a situation. Participants completed the entire scale; however, points for related duties were not included because this section pertained to meeting the needs of students with physical disabilities, which were outside the focus of this study. When scores for each item were added, the maximum score for the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale excluding the related duties section was 144.

Dawson and Scott (2013) developed the scale using the Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy Scale for general education teachers as a framework (Tschannen-Moran, 2018). In the final
version of the instrument, which was tested with 431 pre-service and in-service teachers, reliability was established at .913 (Cronbach’s alpha). The internal consistency reliability values for each subscale were: instruction (.880), professionalism (.843), teacher support (.846), classroom management (.882), and related duties (.779). Validity was obtained through the moderate correlation between the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale and the Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy Scale, \( r = .742, p = .000 \), (Dawson & Scott, 2013). The overall mean response on the final version of the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale was 7.44 (\( SD = 0.99 \)), and scores for items ranged from 5.52 (\( SD = 2.61 \)) to 8.53 (\( SD = 0.98 \)).

The completion time for the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013) was approximately 20 minutes. Data from the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale were used for descriptive purposes to answer the second research question and for triangulation. These data were also used to identify participants for the subsequent semi-structured interviews and open-ended reflective prompts.

**Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

Interviews (see Appendix H) were conducted to learn about participants’ professional experiences and the meaning they made of those experiences (Seidman, 2013). Interviews with six teachers who completed the demographic survey and the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013) were conducted to gather data about their specific experiences and perceptions. All teachers were asked the same sequence of questions, the exact wording of which was identical for each participant (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). Responses to these 15 open-ended questions allowed this researcher to better
understand teachers’ perceptions of their degree of preparedness and self-efficacy. Participants were asked additional questions throughout the interviews to elicit and clarify information and insight shared by participants.

The interview questions pertained to teachers’ backgrounds, professional responsibilities, and motivations for teaching in an urban district. The researcher sought information about participants’ teacher preparation programs, student teaching experiences, and initial expectations of and hopes for their careers. The interview protocol also included questions about teachers’ perceived preparedness for teaching and case management, confidence level, professional development experiences, and challenging experiences as special education teachers in an urban district.

Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain information that could be compared and contrasted (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). An expert panel of special education teachers who work with students with disabilities in an urban school reviewed the interview protocol and edits were made based upon their responses. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interview responses were coded for the identification of themes. The completion time for each interview was a maximum of 60 minutes. The data from these interviews were used to answer the first research question.

**Open-Ended Reflective Prompts**

Written responses to two reflection questions (see Appendix I) following the interviews provided further insight into the rewards and challenges experienced by urban special education teachers. Each participant who completed an interview was sent a document via e-mail asking her to reflect on experiences perceived as rewarding and
challenging in their careers as special educators. The completion time for both open-ended reflective prompts was approximately 20 minutes. The reflective prompt responses were coded for the identification of themes. The data from these reflective prompts were used to answer the third research question. In appreciation of her time, each participant in the interview and open-ended reflective prompts was given a $25 gift card.

**Description and Justification of the Analyses**

The qualitative data were analyzed through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Participants’ responses to the surveys, interviews, and open-ended reflective prompts were condensed to focus, simplify, and organize the data. Data condensation involved inductive and deductive coding and the development of themes and categories. Data display, which includes matrices and networks, was used to organize data into accessible, compact forms to facilitate robust analysis. Both data condensation and data display contributed to the drawing of conclusions. This researcher sought patterns and explanations in the data to draw and verify conclusions (Miles et al., 2014).

In first cycle coding, meaningful material was identified and organized into chunks that established patterns. Second cycle coding utilized pattern coding to group summarized segments of data into a smaller number of themes or categories (Miles et al., 2014).

Each case was analyzed on a within-case basis to develop a deep understanding of each individual case. Subsequently, a cross-case analysis of all cases was conducted in order to increase generalizability to other contexts (Miles et al., 2014). The coding, organization, and analysis of qualitative data were completed by hand.
Table 4 indicates the alignment of the research questions with the methods of data collection and forms of analysis.

Table 4

Alignment of Research Questions, Methods of Data Collection, and Forms of Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Method of Data Collection</th>
<th>Form of Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Demographic survey Interviews (questions 1-13)</td>
<td>Descriptive Data condensation Data display Conclusion drawing and verification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale Interview (questions 14-15)</td>
<td>Data condensation Data display Conclusion drawing and verification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Open-ended reflective prompts</td>
<td>Data condensation Data display Conclusion drawing and verification</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Data analysis followed the procedures recommended by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014).

**Data Collection Procedures and Timeline**

Upon approval of the study by the Institutional Review Board, this researcher received permission from district and building administrators to conduct the study. Consent was obtained from participating teachers who were identified with the assistance of administrators and by review of school websites. The demographic survey and the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013) were sent by e-mail to participants, who completed and returned the instruments via e-mail.
Following the scoring of the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013), six participants were contacted by e-mail to request their participation in semi-structured interviews and open-ended reflective prompts. These participants met the following criteria: (a) five or fewer years of experience teaching special education; (b) pre-service or in-service experience working with students with learning disabilities in inclusion, co-taught, or resource room settings; and (c) scores among the highest on the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale. Participants were also selected based on a balanced representation of pre-service and in-service experiences in elementary, middle, and high school grade levels. Eleven teachers altogether were invited to participate in the interviews and open-ended reflective prompts in order to attain six participants. Interviews, which were a maximum of 60 minutes, took place after school at the school of either the participant or researcher. Interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed. The data for each case study were analyzed and coded.

The following timeline guided the data collection process:

1. Approval for this study was sought and received from the Institutional Review Board at Western Connecticut State University in late January 2019.

2. The proposal for this study was presented to the supervisor of research and testing for the school district in early February 2019. Permission from this supervisor was received in mid-March 2019. Subsequent approval and the signed permission form were received from the superintendent of schools in late March 2019.

50
3. Permission letters were sent by e-mail to building principals in late March 2019. After three attempts, signed permission letters were received from 29 out of 31 principals by mid-April 2019.

4. Between late March and early May 2019, all special education teachers whose principals returned signed permission forms were contacted via e-mail to request their participation in the study. These teachers were identified with the assistance of building administrators and by review of school websites. A teacher consent form was attached to the e-mail inviting special education teachers to participate in the study. Of the 178 special education teachers who were invited to participate in the study, signed consent forms were received from 39 teachers by early May.

5. Upon receipt of signed teacher consent forms, all initial participants were e-mailed the demographic survey and the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013). Completed demographic surveys and efficacy scales were received from 34 participants between late March and early May.

6. Completed demographic surveys were reviewed and the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scales were scored in early May 2019.

7. Based on their scores on the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale, their number of years of teaching experience, and the settings and grades in which they were experienced, potential participants for the interviews and open-ended reflective prompts were contacted via e-mail in early May 2019.
8. Upon receipt of signed teacher consent forms from six participants, interviews were scheduled in early and mid-May 2019. Semi-structured interviews were conducted over two weeks in mid- to late May 2019.

9. Within a day of each interview, each participant was sent via e-mail a document containing two open-ended reflective prompts. Participants’ responses to the open-ended reflective prompts were received in late May 2019.

10. Participants were invited to review interview transcriptions for the purpose of member checking to assure accuracy in early June 2019. Transcripts were sent via e-mail to two participants who indicated a desire to review their interviews.

**Statement of Ethics**

Permission to conduct the research was granted by the Institutional Review Board at Western Connecticut State University. Approval was sought from and granted by the superintendent of schools. Permission was then sought from principals of all school buildings in the district. Signed permission forms were received from principals of 29 out of 31 schools in the district after three attempts for approval. Special education teachers at these schools were contacted by e-mail and asked to give their written consent to participate in the study. To assure confidentiality, each participant was assigned a pseudonym and a coded identification number. All data were collected by this researcher. The data were maintained in a locked file cabinet and on a password-protected computer. Codes were assigned to responses and these data were available to researchers related to the study for the purpose of data verification, coding, and analysis. An internal audit of all data was
conducted. The results were made available upon request to participants and respective school administrators.
CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF THE DATA AND EXPLANATION OF THE FINDINGS

The purposes of this study were to understand urban special education teachers’ perceptions of their self-efficacy and preparedness to teach students with learning disabilities, and to learn about experiences teachers identified as rewarding or challenging. The following chapter provides an analysis of data collected and explanation of the findings of the three research questions:

1. How do urban special education teachers experience their teaching responsibilities in relation to their expectations based on their teacher preparation program experiences?
2. How do urban special education teachers perceive their self-efficacy in their current position?
3. What do special education teachers identify as rewards and challenges that they experience in an urban school district?

This chapter presents the results of this study. The first section includes a description of the data followed by detailed information about the coding process and data analysis. A review of the instruments and description of the cases follow. This chapter then identifies and discusses the themes that emerged from the data. Finally, the research questions are discussed in relation to the themes and findings of the study.

Description of Data

Data for the first research question were collected through demographic surveys and semi-structured interviews. The Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013) and interviews produced data to answer the second research question. Data
for the third research question were obtained through open-ended reflective prompts answered by participants following completion of interviews.

**Data Analysis**

Demographic surveys were analyzed and Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scales (Dawson & Scott, 2013) were scored to identify high scoring participants with five or fewer years of teaching experience. Semi-structured interviews and open-ended reflective prompts completed by these participants were coded by hand. In first cycle coding, descriptive codes were assigned to portions of text to identify topics addressed by participants (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The initial 60 codes, which were generated using deductive and inductive coding, were grouped into five categories. Second cycle coding, in which some codes were eliminated and others were collapsed, resulted in 20 codes. The researcher then categorized the emergent codes into the following categories: (a) pre-service journey, (b) teaching career, (c) perceptions of preparedness for teaching/self-efficacy, (d) support, and (e) insight. These five categories revealed emergent themes.

The five themes that were identified were (a) Special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy participated in teacher preparation programs that varied in requirements, support, and perceived value; (b) Special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy recalled having varying perceptions of their preparedness for teaching upon the completion of their teacher preparation programs; (c) Special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy readily identified specific challenges and rewards in their teaching positions; (d) The majority of special education teachers did not feel exceptional
learner ready on day one for student behaviors; and (e) Special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy received support from various sources in their teaching career.

These five themes led to the identification of two main findings. First, while they had varying perceptions of their preparedness to teach when they completed their teacher preparation programs, many special educators with a strong sense of self-efficacy believed they were making a difference in the lives of their students, despite a lack of resources. Second, although they felt challenged by some of the responsibilities of their teaching positions such as managing student behavior, many special education teachers developed a strong sense of self-efficacy over time, due in part to the assistance they received from their colleagues. The categories, themes, and findings, which are displayed in Appendix J, are discussed further later in this chapter. A description of the instruments used in this study is presented in the next section.

**Instruments**

Special education teachers from the school district were invited to participate in a 10-question demographic survey and the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013). This scale consisted of 19 questions about their perceptions of their self-efficacy in the areas of instruction, professionalism, teacher support, classroom management, and related duties. The average scores of 34 teachers who participated in the demographic survey and Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale are shown in Table 5.
Table 5

Participants’ Years of Experience and Average Scores on Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of Experience</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Average Overall Score</th>
<th>Average Instruction Subscale Score</th>
<th>Average Professionalism Subscale Score</th>
<th>Average Teacher Support Subscale Score</th>
<th>Average Classroom Management Subscale Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>127.5</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>23.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>126.8</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>41.0</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>22.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>130.8</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>134.7</td>
<td>40.3</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Average Overall Score (Max. = 144); Average Instruction Subscale Score (Max = 45); Average Professionalism Subscale Score (Max. = 45); Average Teacher Support Subscale Score (Max. = 27); Average Classroom Management Subscale Score (Max. = 27)

The scores of six high-scoring participants who were invited to participate in interviews and open-ended reflective prompts are shown in Table 6.
Table 6

Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013) Scores of Participants Selected for Interviews and Open-Ended Reflective Prompts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonyms</th>
<th>Overall Score</th>
<th>Instruction Subscale Score</th>
<th>Professionalism Subscale Score</th>
<th>Teacher Support Subscale Score</th>
<th>Classroom Management Subscale Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allison</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krista</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Average Overall Score (Max. = 144); Average Instruction Subscale Score (Max = 45); Average Professionalism Subscale Score (Max. = 45); Average Teacher Support Subscale Score (Max. = 27); Average Classroom Management Subscale Score (Max. = 27)

Semi-structured interviews with these six participants consisted of 15 questions about their pre-service training, teaching experience, reasons for becoming urban special education teachers, and preparedness for instructional and case management duties. Following the interviews, participants wrote responses to two open-ended reflective prompts about the rewards and challenges of their teaching experiences.

Case Study Participants

Six teachers participated in interviews and open-ended reflective prompts. These teachers met the following criteria: (a) five or fewer years of experience teaching special
education; (b) pre-service or in-service experience working with students with learning disabilities in inclusion, co-taught, or resource room settings; and (c) scores among the highest on the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013). The participants also comprised a balanced representation of pre-service and in-service experience among elementary, middle, and high school grade levels. Participants indicated experience with students with learning disabilities on demographic surveys. However, interview data revealed that several participants’ teaching positions at the time of the interviews were not necessarily in inclusion, co-taught, or resource settings, but in self-contained classrooms for students with intellectual disabilities, autism, and emotional disturbance. Each participant comprised one case. Profiles of each participant are provided, in addition to a quotation from their interview, to offer a sense of context and voice. All quoted materials are referenced by the line numbers of participants’ interviews.

Tina

Originally from Maine, Tina moved to Connecticut while enrolled in her undergraduate program in education at a public university in Maine. She completed the coursework for her bachelor’s degree in early childhood education and two internships of 16 weeks each in Maine, followed by a full semester of student teaching in a first-grade general classroom in a rural district in Connecticut. Upon completion of her program, which included a minor in special education, she felt “very prepared” to teach students with learning disabilities. Certified to teach early childhood and special education in Connecticut, she initially hoped to become a kindergarten or first-grade general education teacher in a
rural setting; however, she was eager to “get [a] foot in the door and start getting experience” in any position (344-345).

Prior to obtaining her first teaching position, Tina, who was white, worked as a paraprofessional for one year in the district in which she student taught. For her first three years of teaching, she taught special education preschool students in another building within the district. She subsequently earned a master’s degree in Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) through an online program of a public university in Ohio. At the time of the interview, she was at the end of her fifth year of teaching special education in the district. She was the teacher of a self-contained class consisting of 12 kindergarten and first-grade students with autism; some of her students also exhibited severe behaviors. Her class was assisted by two paraprofessionals and four behavior therapists.

One of Tina’s primary responsibilities was the creation of each student’s program book, which consisted of a detailed lesson plan for each objective in his or her Individualized Education Plan (IEP). She trained assigned support staff members to use the program books, and developed schedules in 15-minute increments for each student. Tina also taught whole class lessons, planned center activities, conducted evaluations, and completed IEP documents.

Tina, whose main goal for her students was the ability to function in the general classroom academically and socially, encouraged inclusion of her students in mainstream classes to the greatest extent possible. She considered her students successful when they demonstrated progress in learning letters and numbers, and increased their participation in circle time or the literacy program. Her hope for her students as they progressed through the
autism program was full inclusion in general education with the support of paraprofessionals or behavior therapists.

Tina stated the following:

My dad asks me all the time why I don’t leave for [a district] that pays better. I just tell him . . . I like the population I work with. I like the program I’m in, but also . . . being the kids’ constant in their lives. Some of these kids don’t have both parents or their parents work so much, or they’re being bounced around between relatives while their parents are trying to figure things out. So I like being the main person. I like knowing that I’m truly making a difference. Plus every day is a different day. . . . it’s exciting. (62-72)

**Beth**

Beth, who was originally from New York, earned a bachelor’s degree in public health and worked for 16 years in group homes for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. She was motivated to become a special education teacher by her experiences as a supervisor in a group home where she taught life skills to young adults. In her graduate program for special education at a public university in Connecticut, Beth, who was white, observed classrooms and participated in an internship of one semester in which she worked with students in an urban setting. She completed two eight-week student teaching placements. Her first placement was at a high school in the urban district in which she subsequently was hired, followed by a resource classroom for third- to fifth-grade students in a rural district. Upon completion of her master’s degree, she considered herself “slightly prepared” to teach students with learning disabilities. She hoped to find a job teaching high
school students in a community-based learning program but expressed no preference of geographical location.

Beth was interviewed at the end of her fifth year of teaching in a self-contained classroom for students with intellectual disabilities. Her responsibilities in this classroom, which consisted of 12 students in first through fourth grade assisted by four paraprofessionals, included ensuring the safety and wellbeing of her students, promoting independent living and social skills, and teaching basic academic skills such as letters, numbers, and spelling of students’ names. Her main goal was for her students to become as independent as possible. Her desired outcomes for her students also included toilet training, sitting appropriately, and walking in line. Beth stated the following:

I thought I was prepared and then when I started, I said, “What the heck did I get myself into? I remember going into the class. Now nobody told me that when you start here, you can come in earlier than the new teacher training. I didn’t get to my classroom until Thursday, and of course my classroom was a hot mess. Everything was thrown all over the place. There [was] nothing on the wall. I remember standing there . . . in awe, because it said [on the door] [my last name]. I’m like, “Oh my . . . this is where I’m supposed to be.” And my second [thought] was, “What am I going to do with all this?” Everything was in disarray. I didn’t know anything about the students. (620-633)

Allison

After earning a bachelor’s degree in psychology, Allison pursued a master’s degree in elementary and special education at a private college in upstate New York. She was assigned
to a suburban school district in New York where she completed two student teaching assignments of four weeks each that consisted primarily of observations and teaching small group lessons. Although she reported that her program required limited observations and no internship prior to student teaching, she felt “moderately prepared” to teach students with learning disabilities when she graduated. She hoped to teach in a resource setting in which she could work with small groups of students.

After graduation, she worked in a self-contained classroom for two years, followed by the Birth to Three system for an additional two years. She also worked for a public university in Connecticut on a research project involving an experimental curriculum for social skills development in toddlers. After a hiatus of eight years to raise her children, she returned to the profession as a reading tutor and substitute teacher at a technical high school.

At the time of the interview, Allison, who was white, was finishing her third year working full-time as a special education teacher in this urban district. She taught a self-contained class for students in grades four to eight with intellectual disabilities and behavioral challenges. In her classroom, which consisted of seven students and two paraprofessionals, Allison’s primary goal was to prepare students for maximum independence. She described her main responsibilities as developing and assessing the effectiveness of a curriculum inclusive of all academic areas and functional life skills. Her desired outcomes for her students were emotional regulation, appropriate social interactions, and the maintenance of acquired skills.

Allison was motivated to become a special education teacher by her own experiences as a student. She stated the following:
By the time I had graduated high school, I had gone to 16 different schools in different districts and states. And so I felt that there was a lack of continuity there. It caused me to struggle a lot. I probably had some learning issues that went undiagnosed and realizing that as an adult was my motivator. I wanted to be able to help kids that might be feeling the same way as I have. (24-32)

**Donna**

Donna, who was white, graduated from a private university in Connecticut with a bachelor’s degree in elementary and special education. She completed numerous field work requirements in urban schools throughout her first three years of college. During her senior year, she completed a semester-long internship at an elementary school in a suburban district, followed by a five-week elementary student teaching placement in a city school and 10-week special education assignment in a magnet school located in a suburb. Upon completion of her program, she perceived herself as “very prepared” to teach students with learning disabilities. Based on her pre-service experiences, Donna hoped to work with urban kindergarten students in a resource setting.

A first-year educator, Donna was a resource teacher with 25 students in grades one through five. Her primary responsibilities included providing specialized instruction and behavior management. Her greatest desire was for her students to generalize the skills she taught them to become independent in the general classroom. She also cited improved reading comprehension skills and sustained attention to tasks as additional goals. She stated the following:
I spent a lot of time in the . . . schools, so I did see an urban setting very early on and it made me want to continue teaching in that setting. . . . I really wanted to work in an urban setting in a Title I school and this was one of the closest ones. (10-12, 37-39)

**Melissa**

After earning a bachelor’s degree in elementary education and working for several years as a paraprofessional and Head Start teacher, Melissa enrolled in a master’s degree program for special education. While in graduate school, she was hired to teach in this urban district under a Durational Shortage Area Permit (DSAP), which enabled her to begin teaching before completing her certification requirements. With the DSAP, her employment as a teacher fulfilled the student teaching requirement of her program. Melissa, who was white, earned both of her degrees from public universities in Connecticut. She considered herself “slightly prepared” to teach students with learning disabilities when she completed her certification program. She hoped to work with lower elementary students with moderate to severe disabilities in a self-contained setting.

After working for three years in this district as a resource teacher for kindergarten to third-grade students, Melissa, who also taught for three summers in a class for students with intellectual disabilities, was transferred to a self-contained classroom due to staffing shortages. In this setting, she worked with six kindergarten and first-grade students with emotional disturbance and learning disabilities supported by two paraprofessionals and, temporarily, two behavior therapists. Melissa, whose responsibilities focused on safety and behavior management, hoped that her students’ behavior would improve sufficiently to increase their time in the general classroom. She stated the following:
I always enjoyed children and teaching them, and I felt that special education was more . . . where I would be interested in [teaching]. Also, I was kind of a difficult student, so I think that also helped motivate me. I wanted to help the kids that were like I was. . . . I did . . . think I’d be somewhere urban because I’d heard about the parents in the suburban districts and that kind of scared me away. (19-24, 364-366)

**Krista**

Krista, who also was white, majored in elementary and special education in her undergraduate program at a private university in Rhode Island. She participated in weekly field work experiences during her sophomore and junior years that consisted of working with small groups of students and teaching unit lessons. During her senior year, she spent a full semester student teaching in a general fourth-grade classroom in an urban school in Rhode Island. Her special education student teaching placement was in a co-taught fourth-grade classroom in a suburban Rhode Island school. Upon graduation, she believed she was “very prepared” to teach students with learning disabilities. She envisioned herself as an urban special educator in a co-taught elementary classroom.

Shortly after graduating with her bachelor’s degree, Krista was hired to teach resource and co-taught math classes at a high school in this district. After her first year, she requested a transfer to an elementary school, where she taught various grade levels over the past four years. She subsequently earned a master’s degree in instructional technology and a sixth year certificate in reading, both from universities in Connecticut.

At the time of the interview, Krista taught a caseload of 26 second- and third-grade students in resource and co-taught settings. In addition to working with small groups of
students on reading and math skills, her responsibilities included responding to behavioral
issues of her students, assisting students with activities in the newly implemented science
curriculum, and covering classrooms for teachers. Krista stated the following about her
desired outcomes for her students:

I would really like them to become advocates for themselves. Most of my students
are performing significantly below grade level, but I want them to know they can do
it. . . . They’re bigger than their disability. [I say.,] ‘Yes, you might struggle with
reading, but just because you can’t read doesn’t mean you can’t learn. So you find
someone to read it for you and then you can answer all the questions.’ I want them to
find what tools work for them, and then ask for that in order to be successful. (268-
275, 283-284)

Themes

This section presents the themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews
and open-ended reflective prompts completed by six participants with a strong sense of self-
efficacy as evidenced by their high scores on the Teaching Students with Disabilities
Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013). Five themes and related subthemes emerged from
the data, as shown in Table 7.
Table 7

Themes Identified from Semi-Structured Interviews and Open-Ended Reflective Prompts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy participated in teacher preparation programs that varied in requirements, support, and perceived value.</td>
<td>Participants had varying perceptions of the value of these requirements. Teachers received varying levels of support in their student teaching experiences. There was no distinct preparation pathway that impacted a strong sense of self-efficacy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy recalled having varying perceptions of their preparedness for teaching upon the completion of their teacher preparation programs.</td>
<td>Participants perceived varying levels of preparedness for instructional intervention and workload. Despite receiving some instruction in their teacher preparation programs, participants felt unprepared for case management and classroom management. Participants who completed teacher preparation programs at universities located in cities received preparation for teaching in urban settings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy readily identified specific challenges and rewards in their teaching positions.</td>
<td>Participants were motivated to teach special education in an urban setting by their personal and professional experiences. Participants frequently identified the lack of resources as their greatest challenge.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
### Table 7

**Themes Identified from Semi-Structured Interviews and Open-Ended Reflective Prompts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy readily identified specific challenges and rewards in their teaching positions.</td>
<td>Teachers identified the ability to make a difference in the lives of urban students as a rewarding aspect of their careers. Parental involvement was perceived as positive and rewarding at times by some participants and challenging or lacking by others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The majority of special education teachers did not feel exceptional learner ready on day one for student behaviors.</td>
<td>Beginning special education teachers in all types of classrooms found it challenging to manage severe behavior of students. Teachers in self-contained classrooms received more behavior training provided by the school district than teachers who worked in resource settings. Teachers often lacked needed behavioral support from building administrators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy received support from various sources in their teaching career.</td>
<td>As beginning special education teachers, participants relied heavily on support from special education teacher colleagues and less on the assistance of assigned mentors. Participants had diverse experiences and perceptions of support from administrators at school and district levels. Participants overall did not view district professional development as a source of support.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first theme that emerged from the data was that special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy participated in teacher preparation programs that varied in requirements, support, and perceived value. Participants completed teacher preparation programs with a wide variety of requirements in terms of observations, internships, and student teaching. Not only did participants have varying perceptions of the value of these requirements, but also they received varying levels of support from the cooperating teachers of their student teaching placements. There appeared to be no distinct pathway to teacher preparation that resulted in a strong sense of self-efficacy; participants, who attended public and private universities in several states, completed student teaching assignments of various durations and in diverse settings. Moreover, two teachers who felt “slightly prepared” to teach upon the completion of their programs scored higher on the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013) than those who felt “very prepared.”

The second theme was that special educators with a strong sense of self-efficacy recalled having varying perceptions of their preparedness for teaching upon the completion of their teacher preparation programs. Participants perceived varying levels of preparedness for instructional intervention and workload. Despite receiving some instruction in their teacher preparation programs, they felt unprepared for case management and classroom management. Additionally, participants who completed teacher preparation programs at universities located in cities received preparation for teaching in urban settings.

The third theme that emerged from the data was that special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy readily identified specific challenges and rewards of their
teaching positions. Participants were motivated to teach special education in an urban setting by their personal and professional experiences. They frequently identified the lack of resources as one of their greatest challenges, and their ability to make a difference in the lives of urban students as rewarding. Parental involvement was perceived as positive and rewarding by some participants and challenging or lacking by others.

The fourth theme indicated that the majority of special education teachers did not feel exceptional learner ready on day one for student behaviors. Beginning special education teachers in all types of classrooms found it challenging to manage severe behavior of students; however, teachers in self-contained classrooms received more behavior training provided by the school district than teachers who worked in resource settings. Additionally, teachers often lacked needed behavioral support from building administrators.

Finally, the fifth theme that emerged from the data was that special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy received support from various sources in their teaching career. As beginning special educators, participants relied heavily on support from their special education colleagues and less on the assistance of assigned mentors. Participants had diverse experiences and perceptions of support from administrators at school and district levels. Overall, participants did not view district professional development as a source of support.
Theme 1: Special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy participated in teacher preparation programs that varied in requirements, support, and perceived value

The six participants, all of whom had a strong sense of self-efficacy based on their scores on the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013) completed teacher preparation programs that varied widely in their requirements for observations, internships, and student teaching. Three subthemes emerged from the data: (a) participants had varying perceptions of the value of these requirements, (b) teachers received varying levels of support in their student teaching experiences, and (c) there was no distinct preparation pathway that impacted a strong sense of self-efficacy.

Observations. Participants reported a range in requirements for observations in their teacher preparation programs. Donna reported that she began observing classrooms to fulfill field work requirements beginning in her freshman year of college. Krista began going into urban Rhode Island schools to observe and assist with small groups on a weekly basis during her sophomore year. Melissa, who also completed several hours of observations for her classes, contacted schools in suburban districts where administrators selected teachers for her to observe. Beth, who was required to observe classrooms for some of her coursework, found it difficult to find special education teachers who would allow her to observe. She fulfilled her requirements by observing two general education teachers in inclusion classrooms. Conversely, Allison stated that she did “not really” do observations before she student taught.
**Internships.** All participants fulfilled internship requirements prior to student teaching. These experiences were diverse in duration and setting. Donna explained that her field work requirements from her freshman through junior years of college initially consisted of observations but transitioned to internship-type activities, all in a large urban district in central Connecticut. In consultation with the classroom teacher, she planned and taught one lesson each week upon which she received feedback from the classroom teacher. During the fall semester of her senior year, she completed a 15-week practicum in a suburban third-grade class, where she planned and taught two lessons per day.

Krista also had internship activities as part of her program. Throughout her junior year, she taught academic lessons for two hours each week in urban Rhode Island schools. She prepared and presented units of lessons in social studies, reading, math, and science with a partner. Tina completed two internships of 16 weeks each during her junior year in rural schools in Maine. One of her internships involved leading activities for parents and their children ages birth to three years. Tina spent three days each week working with suburban kindergarten students in her second internship.

Beth provided resource reading instruction for urban elementary students in her internship, which consisted of two hours per week for one semester. Melissa completed a two-week internship in which she spent full days in an urban second-grade classroom observing, assisting, and implementing several lessons. Allison stated that she participated in “limited” internship activities prior to her student teaching assignments.

**Student Teaching.** Participants also had diverse student teaching experiences in terms of duration, depth, and setting. Two teachers participated in one student teaching
assignment. Tina was assigned to a first-grade general classroom in a small, suburban Connecticut school for a full semester. Melissa, whose first special education teaching position fulfilled the student teaching requirement of her special education teacher preparation program under a DSAP, spoke about her student teaching experience for her initial certification in elementary education which she completed for her undergraduate degree. She student taught in a full-day kindergarten classroom in an urban district for one full semester.

Four teachers participated in two placements of varying length. Beth completed two student teaching assignments of eight weeks each within one semester. Her first placement was in a high school magnet school where she taught a life skills class for two-and-a-half hours each day and two co-taught English classes. In her second assignment, she student taught in a resource room for students in grades 3 through 5 in a suburban elementary school.

Donna also student taught for one full semester. She spent the first five weeks in a general kindergarten classroom in an urban district, followed by 10 weeks of special education student teaching in which she worked with seventh-grade urban students who were bused to a suburban school. Krista completed two student teaching assignments in her senior year of college in Rhode Island. She first taught in an urban fourth-grade general classroom for a full semester, followed by a second semester in a fourth-grade co-taught classroom in a suburban district in Rhode Island. In the co-taught classroom, she worked with students whose disabilities included autism and learning disabilities.

Allison, who completed her student teaching in 1996, prior to a lengthy hiatus from teaching to raise her children, spent four weeks in a fifth-grade general classroom followed
by four weeks in a resource room for students in grades 3 through 5 in an affluent suburb of upstate New York. She stated that she primarily observed and worked with small groups of students. She developed lesson plans for her elementary placement but recalled gaining little hands on experience as a student teacher.

Participants had varying perceptions of the value of these requirements. Teachers found required observations, internships, and student teaching experiences valuable to varying degrees. Beth reported minimal benefit from observations because of the difficulty she experienced accessing special education teachers. She noted that one of the general education teachers she observed was approaching retirement, an event which was reflected in her frustration level and their conversations about teaching.

When asked to identify the experiences that she found most valuable in her teacher preparation program, Tina referred to her internships. She stated the following:

I feel like those were the most beneficial because you got to take what you were learning and use it . . . and it wasn’t all on . . . your shoulders. There was somebody else there who had all the knowledge, that had the experience to say . . . you should’ve done this or let’s do this, or this is how I would’ve done that. (432-438)

Melissa stated that observations were among the most helpful components of her teacher preparation program. She reported a contrasting experience with her internship, however. Melissa spent her two-week internship in an urban district paired with a teacher who “spent most of her day sitting at her desk,” assigned work consisting mostly of worksheets, and appeared reluctant to refer a struggling student for testing for special
education (541). She stated, “as much as it was not a good experience, it was a good experience because I learned what not to do” (601-603).

Krista identified her student teaching experience as most valuable in her teacher preparation program. She stated that the length of her student teaching placements, which amounted to a full year between her general and special education assignments, “set [her] up to be successful” (833).

Allison stated that she found “nothing in the practical portion” (605-606) of her teacher preparation program valuable to becoming an urban special educator, but reported receiving the greatest benefit from the coursework, particularly literature about urban education (Kozol, 1991).

Teachers received varying levels of support in their student teaching experiences. The two participants whose teacher preparation programs required one student teaching placement reported positive experiences with their cooperating teachers. Tina, who completed one semester-long assignment in a suburban first-grade general education class, perceived her cooperating teacher as supportive. She allowed Tina to observe initially, adding lessons and responsibilities gradually until Tina taught and managed the class for the entire school day. Tina stated, “She gave me a lot of help, a lot of resources, and really . . . just took a leap . . . [and said] ‘It’s all on you’” (288-290).

Melissa, who also had one student teaching assignment, felt supported by her cooperating teacher, with whom she worked in an urban kindergarten general classroom. She recalled that her cooperating teacher, who was experienced in working with student teachers, was “very nurturing,” answered all her questions, and showed her the
organizational strategies she used in the classroom (264). Like Tina’s cooperating teacher, she slowly turned over teaching and managerial responsibilities to Melissa. When her cooperating teacher unexpectedly required surgery, Melissa felt prepared to lead the classroom for the remainder of her placement, despite the presence of a substitute teacher.

The four participants who fulfilled their student teaching requirements in two placements shared experiences that contrasted greatly between their first and second cooperating teachers. Krista believed that the cooperating teacher in her first placement, which was an urban fourth-grade general classroom, did not trust her because she did not give her a lot of responsibility. She stated, “She had this vision of what I should have done, and I guess I had this vision of what I needed, and neither of our visions matched up . . . and that was really hard” (502-504). Recalling her cooperating teacher’s negativity toward her and her own tendency to overanalyze events, she said, “I thought I shouldn’t be a teacher. I almost didn’t even go on to my next placement. I was thinking I should just drop this and pick another major” (511-514). In contrast, Krista’s cooperating teacher in her subsequent assignment in a suburban co-taught fourth-grade class was highly supportive. She encouraged Krista to explore a variety of ways to accomplish tasks, to reflect on ways to improve her teaching techniques, and to teach with confidence. Krista credited this positive experience for her strong desire to co-teach in inclusive classrooms.

Beth, who first student taught in a life skills program at an urban high school, reported feeling supported by her cooperating teacher. After two weeks of working with Beth on curriculum and observing her lessons, she allowed her to teach the self-contained life skills class independently while she observed other students at school- and community-based
job sites. Beth stated, “She was supportive in that she answered all [my] questions. . . . She must have seen something in me that after a certain time. . . [she said], ‘All right, you’re good. Keep it going’” (421-423). The cooperating teacher in her second placement, a suburban resource classroom for students in grades three through five, was “the polar opposite” (439). She recalled, “The teacher said to me, ‘I don’t know you. I am not leaving my students alone with you. I have no idea who you are’” (439-441). The cooperating teacher required Beth to submit all lesson plans to her for review before implementing them. Beth’s access to students’ IEPs was limited, including the goals and objectives to which she aligned instruction. Her cooperating teacher also did not explain clearly to Beth how she created a schedule for her groups, despite Beth’s numerous requests. Beth struggled with the restrictive nature of this cooperating teacher, in part because of her previous experience as a supervisor in group homes. She explained, “Even as a supervisor, I would never talk to somebody like that” (446-447). She stated the following:

Being under her was very difficult for me because I had not had anybody over me like that in such a long time. . . . I don’t do well being micromanaged. And that was completely being micromanaged to the point of where I stood, how I talked, [and] my voice. (465-472)

Beth sought assistance from her university supervisor, who spoke with the cooperating teacher to ameliorate the situation.

Donna also shared varying student teaching experiences. Her first placement of five weeks was in an urban general kindergarten classroom, where she “clicked well” with her cooperating teacher, who consistently gave her helpful feedback (258). She spent the
following 10 weeks working with seventh-grade urban students who were bused to a suburban school district. Her cooperating teacher in this special education assignment was less supportive. He was “the kind of person [who] felt uncomfortable giving other adults feedback” but reluctantly did so when she prepared for observations (259-260).

Allison, whose student teaching placements consisted of four weeks in a general fifth-grade class followed by four weeks in a resource room for grades three through five in a suburban New York district, also described varying experiences. She recalled that her first cooperating teacher “was very old school. He was very unwilling to really share or divulge much of what he was doing. It was mainly an observatory type position with very [few] . . . responsibilities for [me]” (244-247). Her second cooperating teacher was “very different” in that she was “able to facilitate better” (259-260). She stated, “The special education piece was somewhat better . . . but I don’t think either could have prepared me for what was really going to take place” (206-209). She felt that the support she received in her student teaching experience overall was “very minimal” (264). She reflected, “In looking back, it’s shocking the little that [they provided]” (265-266).

**There was no distinct preparation pathway that impacted a strong sense of self-efficacy.** Based on review of the duration and setting of their student teaching placements, a subtheme emerged in which there was no distinct preparation pathway that impacted a strong sense of self-efficacy. For instance, Beth reported feeling “slightly prepared” when she finished her teacher preparation program; however, she demonstrated a strong sense of self-efficacy with a score of 139 out of a possible 144 points on the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013). Although she scored 117 on the scale,
Krista felt “very prepared” to teach upon completion of her program, which consisted of two full semesters of student teaching. Despite two student teaching placements of shorter duration and less depth than the other participants, Allison felt “moderately prepared” upon completion of her program. Table 8 shows the type and location of the college or university through which participants completed their teacher preparation program, a description of their student teaching assignments, participants’ perceptions of their preparedness to teach upon the completion of their programs, and their scores on the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale.
Table 8

Participants' Teacher Preparation Programs, Student Teaching Assignments, Perceptions of Preparedness to Teach, and Scores on the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale

*(Dawson & Scott, 2013)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonyms</th>
<th>Teacher Preparation Program</th>
<th>Student Teaching Assignments</th>
<th>Perception of Preparedness</th>
<th>Scores (Maximum = 144)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>Public university in ME</td>
<td>Full semester in suburban CT grade 1 general class</td>
<td>Very</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>Public university in CT</td>
<td>8 weeks in urban CT high school self-contained and co-taught classes; 8 weeks in suburban CT resource room, grades 3-5</td>
<td>Slightly</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>Public university in CT</td>
<td>Full semester in urban CT kindergarten general class</td>
<td>Slightly</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>Private university in CT</td>
<td>5 weeks in urban CT kindergarten general class; 10 weeks in suburban CT grade 7 resource room</td>
<td>Very</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allison</td>
<td>Private college in NY</td>
<td>4 weeks in suburban NY grade 5 general class; 4 weeks in suburban NY grade 3-5 resource room</td>
<td>Moderately</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krista</td>
<td>Private university in RI</td>
<td>Full semester in urban RI grade 4 general class; full semester in suburban RI co-taught grade 4 class</td>
<td>Very</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Perception of Preparedness refers to the following question on demographic survey: “Evaluate the degree to which you felt prepared to teach students with learning disabilities upon the completion of your teacher certification program.”
Theme 2: Special Education Teachers with a Strong Sense of Self-Efficacy Recalled Having Varying Perceptions of Their Preparedness for Teaching Upon the Completion of Their Teacher Preparation Programs

Participants recalled their perceptions of preparedness for teaching as they finished their teacher preparation programs and sought to begin their careers as special educators. They described varying degrees of preparedness for: (a) instructional intervention, (b) case management, (c) classroom management, (d) workload, and (e) urban settings. Several subthemes emerged from the data in these areas: (a) participants perceived varying levels of preparedness for instructional intervention and workload; (b) despite receiving some instruction in their teacher preparation programs, participants felt unprepared for case management and classroom management; and (c) participants who completed teacher preparation programs at universities located in cities received preparation for teaching in urban settings.

**Instructional intervention.** Three participants spoke about specific aspects of their preparedness, and four participants expressed feelings of unpreparedness for instructional intervention. Tina, whose undergraduate major was in early childhood education, said, “I felt prepared [because] I knew the development of the kids . . . and I knew what was supposed to be happening” (356-358). She explained that she learned about accommodations and modifications for students with disabilities in her program, which stressed the need for flexibility to meet the needs of all students.

Melissa also reported feeling prepared for special education instruction, particularly in reading. She stated that her program emphasized reading instruction, in part to prepare
pre-service teachers for the state reading exam, a passing score on which was required to earn teacher certification. Based on her student teaching experience, Krista felt prepared for the instructional aspects of co-teaching, but was not prepared for teaching resource level classes or high school, neither of which she experienced in either her internship or student teaching placements.

Krista also felt unprepared for teaching reading to special education students. She related the following:

I didn’t really have a lot of reading instruction. I had my gen ed reading instruction, but I’m not teaching gen ed reading. I’m teaching special ed reading and that needs to look a lot more like a reading interventionist than a classroom teacher. . . . That really still affects me because I’m never sure exactly what the best way is for my kids. And that hurts . . . my heart. (857-864)

She was motivated to earn a sixth year degree in reading because she felt unprepared to teach reading to her students.

**Case management.** Participants shared what they remembered learning in their teacher preparation programs about aspects of case management such as writing IEPs, assessing students, and writing evaluation reports. They also reflected on the ways in which they felt unprepared for case management at the conclusion of their programs.

Some teachers reported receiving basic information about case management in their special education courses. Tina recalled learning about special education law and seeing an IEP in one of her courses. Beth learned where to input information in sections of an IEP. Krista received redacted student evaluation reports in class and learned to write goals and
objectives based on the students’ scores. Melissa recalled practicing writing an IEP in a group assignment in one of her courses.

They also acquired some experience in case management through their student teaching placements. Krista gained some experience with writing IEP goals and objectives during her second student teaching placement, in which her cooperating teacher initially modeled and then gradually released the skill to Krista to practice independently. Krista also learned to navigate the computer platform used by the school district to create and save IEP documents.

All participants reported feeling unprepared for case management in some ways as well. Tina lacked knowledge of “the best way to collect the data for all the IEP objectives” (361-362). Beth recalled that the cooperating teacher of her first placement completed the IEP documents for the students on her caseload before Beth arrived. She stated, “I wasn’t able to sit down and do it because she already had all our IEP meetings. . . . She showed me, but that’s still not the same thing” (549-552). Donna reported a similarly limited experience; between her two student teaching assignments, she was able to attend only one Planning and Placement Team (PPT) meeting, which was at the insistence of her university supervisor. In one of her placements, she routinely was asked to cover the classroom while her cooperating teacher attended PPTs.

Donna remembered writing some IEPs in her teacher preparation program, but she felt the preparation was insufficient. She admitted, “I was unprepared when it came to a lot of the paperwork . . . and a lot of the testing” (353-354). Melissa noted that she did not know she would be “solely responsible for everything on [IEPs]” (421-422). She also stated that
she did not learn how to use the results of standardized assessments to create appropriate
goals and objectives for students.

Participants reported receiving varying levels of instruction in the assessment of
students. Although three teachers became familiar with specific tests by testing classmates or
children, no participants recalled writing evaluation reports in their teacher preparation
program. Melissa reported that she received a template in one of her courses, but “it was still
hard because I had never done it before” (451-452). Donna stated, “The evaluation you have
to write up . . . they mentioned it and they sort of showed us. But I was lucky the last teacher
had a template saved to the computer . . . because I wouldn’t have been able to write it up
myself” (366-369).

Classroom management. Four participants described how they felt unprepared for
aspects of classroom management. Melissa, who recalled, “I think we must’ve had a class
about classroom management, but I feel like it was really light” (317-319), stated that her
teacher preparation program taught her about “maybe a little of the behavioral, but not
anywhere near what I’ve seen” (487-488). She said that her program “touched on some
things . . . but it [was] generalized . . . not based on an urban setting” (488-490). She recalled
seeing some challenging student behavior when she worked as a paraprofessional in a
magnet school prior to enrolling in her special education teacher preparation program.

Krista responded, “I can’t say I was really necessarily prepared” (781) by her teacher
preparation program, in which she learned about “significant behaviors, not really how to
deal with them, but finding . . . strategies” (855-856). Tina stated, “As far as behavioral
support . . . there really wasn’t any focus on that” in her program (412-413).
In a course on emotional disturbance and behavioral disorders, Donna learned how to conduct a functional behavior assessment and write a behavior intervention plan, yet she did not feel prepared for severe behavior. In her student teaching experiences, she said, “The worst behaviors I saw were a kid refusing to do work and giving an attitude” (678-679). Of her university, Donna also stated, “I feel like I got a good education there . . . but they didn’t prepare me for such severe behaviors” (490, 493-494). She explained further that in “classroom management, I [had] the knowledge, [but] when it came to applying it, that’s when it’s difficult” (373-374).

Workload. Three participants spoke about their variable preparation to manage a special education workload. Donna remarked, “They tell you you’re going to be busy . . . and you’re going to have to work at home, but they never prepared me for 25 students” (577-580). Tina stated that she did not receive any training in her program for managing her workload as a teacher. Melissa shared that she gained some insight into the workload of teachers when she was enrolled in her elementary education program, in which she was required to assemble a portfolio of lesson plans in various subjects. She noted, “That gave us a good idea of the kind of work we’d have to be doing . . . and how long that would take” (513-515). However, she was not prepared for “the other things you don’t think about” such as following up with parents and completing IEP documents, testing, and evaluations (515-516). She related, “Especially here [as in] a lot of urban places, you have such high numbers on your caseload that a lot of your time is taken up doing all this paperwork rather than actually working with your students” (523-526). The teachers’ union contract allowed for a maximum caseload of 30 students for each special education teacher.
**Urban settings.** Four of the six participants completed internships and student teaching placements in urban school districts. Donna articulated the influence of these experiences on her perceived preparedness to teach in an urban setting. While enrolled in a public university in a Connecticut city, she worked with students in a racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse city for several field work placements and one student teaching assignment. She explained that her teacher preparation program emphasized cultural competence. She stated, “That was something they made sure we understood and could apply to our teaching. . . . Having them focus on that really helped me prepare to work with this population” (148-149, 156-157). Melissa and Krista both credited their urban internships and student teaching experiences to their preparedness for teaching in an urban district.

**Participants perceived varying levels of preparedness for instructional intervention and workload.** Participants recalled learning about reading instruction, co-teaching, and the development of children in their teacher preparation programs. One participant felt especially prepared to teach reading, while another participant expressed that she did not feel prepared in the subject. They perceived themselves as more prepared to deliver instruction in the settings in which they gained hands-on experience through internships and student teaching. One participant stated that she did not feel prepared for teaching resource classes or teaching at the high school level; her teacher preparation program experiences were primarily in co-taught settings at the elementary level.

Participants also expressed varying perceptions of their preparation for the workload of a teacher. Although informed by professors that their teaching positions would require work outside of school hours, one participant perceived herself as unprepared for the reality
of the workload. One participant had a sense of the intensity of the workload based on the time involved in preparing lessons and activities in her elementary education program. Another participant stated she did not receive information through her teacher preparation program about managing a workload.

**Despite receiving some instruction in their teacher preparation programs, participants felt unprepared for case management and classroom management.**

Participants recalled learning through their coursework and student teaching experiences about IEPs, standardized assessments, and evaluation reports to varying extents; however, they all reported feeling unprepared for this aspect of teaching upon the completion of their programs. Some participants learned basic information about classroom management in their programs but did not gain experience with severe behaviors in their internships or student teaching placements. Donna, who acknowledged her struggle to apply her classroom management knowledge to situations involving challenging student behavior, stated, “That’s not something I was prepared for at all until I actually started” (544-545).

**Participants who completed teacher preparation programs at universities located in cities received preparation for teaching in urban settings.** Four of the six participants completed their teacher preparation programs at universities located in cities. Each of these teacher preparation programs required internships and student teaching experiences in urban school districts. Some participants credited their perceptions of preparedness to teach in urban schools to their experiences in these settings when they were pre-service teachers. Krista stated, “I think that because I had some urban school experience that was helpful” (824-825).
Despite their varying perceptions of their preparedness to teach when they finished their teacher preparation programs, participants readily identified rewards and challenges in their positions as special educators.

**Theme 3: Special Education Teachers with a Strong Sense of Self-Efficacy Readily Identified Specific Rewards and Challenges in Their Teaching Positions**

Through interviews and their responses to open-ended reflective prompts, participants revealed their perceptions of the greatest challenges and rewards in their experiences as urban special educators. Four distinct subthemes emerged from the data. First, participants were motivated to teach special education in an urban setting by their personal and professional experiences. They frequently identified the lack of resources as their greatest challenge. Participants also identified the ability to make a difference in the lives of urban students as a rewarding aspect of their teaching careers. Finally, parental involvement was perceived as positive and rewarding at times by some participants and challenging or lacking by others.

**Participants were motivated to teach special education in an urban setting by their personal and professional experiences.** Teachers openly shared their motivations for becoming urban special educators. Beth decided to pursue a career in education after teaching a life skills program for young adults with intellectual disabilities. She sought a job in an urban district because, having lived in several cities, she was comfortable in urban communities. Allison wanted to help students who struggled with academics as she did growing up due to learning challenges and frequent moves. She was attracted to an urban setting because she perceived students who are “disadvantage[d] and [have] less access to
education as . . . resembling [her] own experience” (50-52). Melissa, who expressed a desire to help “difficult students” (23) like herself, was interested in working with small groups of students who “feel like they need you more [and] . . . really appreciate you more” (367-369).

Donna stated that her reason for becoming a special education teacher was the same reason she chose to work in an urban school: “I feel more accomplished and it’s more rewarding to work with students with disabilities. It’s more work, but it’s more rewarding” (20-22). She cited her teacher preparation program experiences in urban schools as her motivation for seeking a teaching position in an urban district. Krista, who pursued a double major in elementary and special education, chose a career in special education for several reasons, including the encouragement of her cooperating teacher in her special education student teaching placement and her experiences as a parent of a child with a disability. She was motivated to work in an urban district by her positive experiences in urban schools as an undergraduate student, and the prospect of student loan forgiveness following a period of employment in this setting. Despite the positive experiences that sparked their motivation to become urban special education teachers, participants faced challenges once they became in-service teachers.

**Participants frequently identified the lack of resources as their greatest challenges.** Four out of six participants expressed that the lack of resources was among their greatest challenges as teachers. Tina voiced a need for more materials, curriculum, training, support, planning time, behavior therapists and paraprofessionals. She explained that, due to a lack of curricula, “we are having to try to find and create all the necessary materials” (18) which, in her program, included individualized program books for students with autism.
Krista reported that when she taught resource-level geometry in an urban high school, “There were no books . . . there was no curriculum . . . so it [was] 18 sped kids in a room with one para who [slept] all day” (684-686). Beth, who affirmed a need for more funding for materials and staffing, said, “[We are] very understaffed to meet all the students’ needs without having staff suffer from burnout” (13-14).

Allison, who shared that she did not have a desk during her first year in the district, stated, “I feel that the administration . . . really needs an awareness of how we’re lacking in resources” (749-751). After teaching in the city for over two years, Allison received a printer assigned to her; however, she had to purchase an ink cartridge with her own funds. She described her involuntary transfer to another building for her second year in the following way:

Upon my arrival, I was given a 10 by 13 [foot] room containing a table, two student desks, and a small whiteboard. There was no curriculum to follow and no student materials or supplies. It is now a fully functional, well-stocked, colorful and thriving classroom. The toll it has taken on me personally, however, to get it to this state has been significant. I was notified two weeks ago that I, along with the program, will be transferred to another building within the city for the next school year. It is time to start over. I am hoping for a printer, some ink, and a desk. (19-26)

Teachers identified the ability to make a difference in the lives of urban students as a rewarding aspect of their careers. All participants provided insight into the ways they believed they impacted students’ lives. Tina felt that she made a difference as a teacher by being a source of stability in the lives of her students, some of whom came from unstable
families. She explained that it was rewarding to witness her students’ growth resulting from the use of ABA principles, and “[to find] out what makes them motivated to learn” (35). She also found it rewarding to work with parents to give them resources to use with their children. Similarly, Beth expressed that it was rewarding to work with students with whom she knew she could make a difference by providing them with instruction and stability over the course of several years.

Allison cited the “impactful” and “fulfilling” rewards of watching her students acquire new skills and apply positive social and behavioral strategies. She said, “I feel a sense of accomplishment [in] having endured and conquered a multitude of obstacles. I possess a sense of pride at having created a program which effectively services such a diverse group of students” (34-36). She spoke about a student who recently had joined her classroom after his behavior in the general education setting resulted in a five-day suspension. At the time of this interview, he had been a student in her class for two weeks, during which time he displayed no negative behavior. She enthused, “Watching this student not only bring joy to his classmates but [also] experience pride at having done so makes me want to endure and go the distance” (45-46).

Donna believed that she made a greater difference in the lives of students whose needs were greater. She recalled a student who refused to wear his new glasses because he thought they made him look “ugly.” After she and her colleagues encouraged him and Donna began to wear her glasses at school, he then started to wear them each day. She reported that “it was so rewarding to know we made a difference for him and made him feel better about himself” (28, 32). Despite the challenges she faced, she said, “Working in an
urban school is the most rewarding for me” (25). Donna shared, “When those students are successful, I think it’s the most rewarding of all because . . . you see them start to grasp the emotional regulation skills that we’re trying to teach them (700-703).

Krista, who expressed that there were many rewarding aspects to teaching special education in an urban district, said, “I love the amount of growth and confidence I see in the students when in small group. When difficult topics unlock for students, I see their eyes light up when they get the right answer after all the work they put in” (24-26). She also found it rewarding to work with a population whose diverse backgrounds and abilities helped her develop her skills and knowledge to meet their needs.

Melissa found it rewarding to work together with teachers and related service providers to not only help students learn but also help colleagues teach effectively. When faced with a behaviorally challenging student whose special education instructional time was increased to meet his needs, she and her co-workers shared the hours to lessen the responsibility on the teacher to whom the student was assigned, and to minimize his negative interactions with peers. She also believed it was rewarding to collaborate with others on teaching and behavioral strategies to benefit students, “[giving] the teachers and other students a better chance at teaching and learning” (29-30).

**Parental involvement was perceived as positive and rewarding at times by some participants and challenging or lacking by others.** All six participants discussed their experiences with the parents and guardians of their students. They reported a mix of positive interactions with parents and frustration with parents who were minimally involved in their children’s education. Melissa explained the following:
A lot of the parents won’t bother you. They either are not very involved, or they’re just really happy that you’re actually helping their kid and they’re grateful for that. . . . Most of the parents that I interacted with . . . were very supportive and grateful for my help. Occasionally we would get one that wanted to tell you how to do your job, but you’re going to get those anywhere. (700-702, 708-710)

However, she cited a combination of factors, including a lack parental involvement, that presented the most challenging aspects of being an urban special educator. She stated the following:

The large caseloads make it difficult to meet students’ [instructional] hours and form groups small enough to be productive. Challenging behaviors can make it more difficult to conduct groups, and a lack of parental support make it that much more difficult to get the behaviors under control. (9-12)

Tina also acknowledged that the lack of parental involvement was a significant challenge in her experience. As a teacher in a self-contained autism program, she saw some parents at arrival and dismissal times. She considered these encounters important opportunities to update parents on their children’s progress, stating, “There’s a lot of communication that goes on between us almost every day or weekly” (128-129). However, reflecting on the challenge of reaching out to less involved parents, she said:

I do not feel that we try hard enough for the parents to get involved. I think the schools, teachers, [and] administrators are so busy and overwhelmed with the number of students [and] behaviors that we cannot really focus on getting our parents more involved. (11-14)
Krista, who also experienced limited parental involvement, stated, “I feel this hurts many of the students. Parents do not fully understand their rights, and as a result, students sometimes are missing out on extra support and services” (14-16).

Conversely, Beth reported numerous rewarding experiences with families. She shared stories about parents whose children improved daily living skills such as feeding, cleaning up after themselves, and communicating their needs at home due to the diligent efforts of the staff. She shared with parents how to reinforce at home the skills their children were learning at school. She stated, “I’ve never been in a PPT [meeting] in the entire time that I’ve been here where [parents] say, ‘I’m really glad he learned the letter A.’ [They say], ‘I’m really glad now he knows how to open up the refrigerator’ or ‘I’m really glad now he uses the Yes and No cards so I can [communicate with] my son’” (274-278).

Although she reported overall positive interactions with parents of her students, Beth experienced frustration at times with some parents, such as a mother who was hesitant to have her son tested for food allergies despite his ongoing digestive issues at school, and a parent who did not want to pick up her child who was found to have a low-grade fever. She also discussed parents who, like their children in her classroom, had cognitive disabilities, making it challenging for them to comprehend information about their children’s disabilities and opportunities for growth.

Beth discussed a student with an intellectual disability whose social and life skills qualified her for placement in a higher-level program. Despite the opportunities that this classroom offered in academics, friendships with peers, and increased time in the general education setting, her mother, who visited the classroom briefly, refused to have her attend.
Beth lamented, “She is also in denial as she is planning to have her daughter go to college to become a lawyer” (36-37). She stated, “We really get along, but there are certain things that [parents] do [that] I just don’t understand” (950-951).

In addition to their interactions with parents, participants discussed several other challenging and rewarding aspects of their careers as teachers. They reported that the ability to make a difference in the lives of their students was a rewarding aspect of their careers. They also identified a lack of resources as one of their greatest challenges. In this third theme, data revealed that participants were motivated to teach special education in urban schools by their personal and professional experiences.

The first three themes that emerged from the data resulted in the first finding: While they had varying perceptions of their preparedness to teach when they completed their teacher preparation programs, many special educators with a strong sense of self-efficacy believed they were making a difference in the lives of their students, despite a lack of resources.

**Theme 4: The Majority of Special Education Teachers Did Not Feel Exceptional Learner Ready on Day One for Student Behaviors**

Participants shared valuable insight and detailed narratives about their experiences with student behavior. Three subthemes emerged from data generated by interviews and open-ended reflective questions. First, beginning special education teachers in all types of classrooms found it challenging to manage severe behavior of students. In addition, teachers in self-contained classrooms received more behavior training provided by the school district
than teachers who worked in resource settings. Finally, teachers often lacked needed behavioral support from building administrators.

**Beginning special education teachers in all types of classrooms found it challenging to manage severe behavior of students.** All participants discussed the behaviors they saw in the settings in which they taught. As previously discussed in the second theme, teachers felt unprepared for aspects of classroom management, despite receiving some instruction in their teacher preparation programs. Once they began teaching, some participants witnessed student behavior that they did not expect.

Tina, whose students included those with autism and severe behaviors, including one with oppositional defiant disorder, said that behavior management was the most difficult aspect of her first year of teaching. She stated, “A big part of our difficulties is behaviors . . . and how to manage them, especially when you’re in a classroom with minimal support and you’ve got multiple kids running around and they all have behaviors” (449-453). She learned some behavior management strategies from speaking with colleagues.

As a new teacher, Beth recalled struggling to manage the behavior of her students, most of whom were in kindergarten, while simultaneously attempting to deliver instruction in a classroom that was not arranged ideally. She remembered frequently teaching them to sit at a table appropriately in order to manage their behavior and prepare them for learning.

Donna, a first-year educator who taught in a resource setting, stated that behavior management was one of her primary responsibilities and her greatest challenge. She felt she was at a disadvantage with behavior management because she started teaching at her school two weeks after the school year started. Due to the change in staffing, her students initially
refused to listen to her directives, and she did not know what to do to achieve compliance. She shared that challenging behavior made it difficult to focus on instruction.

Although she stated that noncompliance was the misbehavior she saw most frequently among her students, Donna also witnessed a wide range of physically aggressive behaviors from her students, including hitting, kicking, spitting, throwing and breaking things, and “running up and down the hall giving us the middle finger” (502). She added, “Kids want to kill each other . . . they get in fights, they attack me, [and] they attack their peers” (685-686). Donna said, “They try but they don’t hurt me. . . . But it’s when they’re doing that to other students, that when it’s the issue” (526-529).

Several students on Donna’s caseload of 25 were “essentially self-contained” (8); due to their severe behavior, they were unable to participate appropriately in the general classroom setting yet they were not placed in the district’s self-contained behavior disorders program. Instead, they spent partial or full days with her in the resource room while she attempted to teach her small groups of students. She stated, “When I am unable to take groups because a student is being confrontational, aggressive, or refuses to remain in the classroom, it is impacting my ability to teach and other students’ instruction” (11-13). A student whose behavior escalated at approximately the same time each day caused Donna to miss one of her groups “for days at a time” (598).

Melissa also provided details about her time in a self-contained classroom for students with behavior disorders. Shortly before the interview, she was transferred involuntarily to this classroom due to the medical leave of the permanent teacher. Melissa was selected by a special education administrator for the transfer because she had the lowest
level of seniority among the special education teachers in a school that had smaller caseloads than other district schools. During the two months before her arrival, the class had been led by substitute teachers and paraprofessionals. She described the classroom as a “mess” due to the lack of consistent staffing and structure (793). Melissa described her role as “basically babysitting and almost like a prison warden,” with safety as her primary responsibility (824-825). She reported instances of physical and verbal aggression, as well as “a lot of furniture and things that get thrown around” (90-91).

This classroom, located in the basement of an elementary school built nearly 100 years ago, did not have telephones in the classrooms; rather, teachers utilized the intercom system to reach the main office staff. The administrators, school psychologist, social worker, and Melissa also had access to two-way radios. Next to the classroom was the “opportunity room,” a seclusion room with hard plastic walls and a metal door with a magnet lock. Melissa, who described this room as “very scary looking,” explained, “Ideally we don’t close the door; we leave it open so the kids can just have a moment to calm down in a safe area . . . where there’s no one they can hurt and nowhere they can hurt themselves” (897-900).

Melissa reported that her class of six students was assisted by two paraprofessionals. In the school district of this study, required credentials of paraprofessionals include a high school or equivalent diploma in addition to 60 college credits, an associate’s degree, or a passing score on a national assessment for paraprofessionals (Civil Service Commission, 2019). In addition, two behavior therapists were sent from the district’s autism program to her classroom on a part-time basis after a parent complained about a lack of behavior support. Melissa reported that the additional staff enabled her to follow a daily routine of
center rotations. However, this change was temporary; one behavior therapist left the school in an ambulance due to chest pain and did not return, and the other was transferred back to the autism program.

Krista recalled her struggles with student behavior in her first year of teaching at a high school. She stated, “I managed and they were not walking all over me. . . . 75% of the time I had a pretty good handle on it,” although she recollected an especially challenging math class at the end of the day with 17 boys and a frequently absent paraprofessional (746-750). Acknowledging that she had to lower her academic expectations in order to manage behavior, she stated, “I had to accept that if I [got] them to do one thing today, then I [counted] it as a success instead of my entire lesson” (756-758). She stated that this experience prepared her to have strong classroom management skills in her current position, which occasionally involved covering classes for other teachers.

**Teachers in self-contained classrooms received more behavior training provided by the school district than teachers who worked in resource settings.** Of the participants who discussed their participation in professional development workshops on behavior management, two taught in self-contained classrooms and one taught in a resource setting at the time of the interviews. Allison, a teacher in a self-contained classroom for students with intellectual disabilities and behavioral challenges, attended three workshops, including a crisis training, led by an independent BCBA who provided behavioral consultant services to the school district. He frequently visited self-contained classes in the district to consult with teachers about the needs of specific students. She explained, “He made a statement right off the bat and . . . that’s ‘I’m trying to get adults to stop being mad at kids’” (686-687) who, he
said, are a “blank slate when they start” (688). She said that his approach, philosophy, and examples made a “lasting” impact on her (690).

In preparation for her transfer to the behavior disorders classroom, Melissa was asked by special education administrators to attend a full day of restraint training. She then spent two hours observing at the district alternative school for students with behavior disorders. During her visit, she learned about the specific program in which students gained and lost points based on their behavior to earn privileges.

Resource teacher Donna attended a two-day district-sponsored training on restorative practices, which she found helpful in handling numerous difficult situations. Although the principles were effective with many of her students, she said they were ineffective with her students with emotional disturbance because “they only care about themselves and their emotions because that’s all they can handle” (739-741).

Donna also received half a day of restraint training. She initially was unsure when a situation necessitated the use of restraint, which caused her to hesitate. She sometimes called for the assistance of an administrator or the school nurse, who immediately restrained the student. She recalled, “I wasn’t sure . . . do I need to do it right now? Should I? And because I was questioning it, I didn’t want to” (562-564). Over time, she became more experienced in judging when to use restraint. Despite this training, she was unable to restrain older students who were closer to her size. She noted, “If we have an older student that needs to be restrained . . . they call [another] teacher . . . [who] is a bigger guy” (553-554). She said, “Because of the restraint training, I [have been] able to protect [my other] students and allow them to leave the room” (529-531).
Teachers often lacked needed behavioral support from building administrators.

As a self-contained teacher of students with multiple disabilities and behavioral challenges, Allison relied on the assistance of her two paraprofessionals, particularly to meet the needs of one student who used a wheelchair and another who was visually impaired. When one paraprofessional was on medical leave for several months, Allison thought about how she could obtain coverage so she could leave the classroom for her lunch break, to which she was entitled in the teacher contract. When she called the principal to suggest her idea, the principal responded, “What? You’ve got five kids!” and promptly hung up the phone.

Allison reflected on the principal’s response, “These are things we expect more [from] kids. We expect emotional regulation [from students]” (570-571). She questioned, “How do we get to the point where we can hang up the phone on someone?” (567-568). In addition to Allison, Melissa experienced a lack of support from administration.

Although she had nearly four years of experience as a special education teacher, the challenges of working in a behavior disorders classroom were new to Melissa. She shared numerous instances in which she needed but lacked the assistance of an administrator or member of the support staff to deescalate behaviors in her classroom. When a group of three students ran out of her room due to the intensifying behavior of other students in the class, she used the intercom system in the classroom to contact the main office; leaving the room to follow them would have left the remaining adult with four other students. She recalled, “Instead of sending someone down to help, I got, ‘Well, why did they leave the room?’” (833-834).
Administrators told Melissa that she and the paraprofessionals were “calling for support too often” (850-851). At times, when Melissa and the paraprofessionals used the intercom system to request assistance, neither administrators nor support staff responded. Melissa felt “they were not interested in supporting us” (853-854). She conceded, “At this point it’s just me and the two paras [who] are stuck down there and nobody bothers with us as long as we don’t bother them” (810-812).

In addition to a lack of needed behavioral support from administrators, interview data revealed that participants who taught in self-contained classrooms received more behavior training from the school district than teachers who worked in resource settings, even though beginning special education teachers in all types of classrooms were challenged by the severe behavior of students. This fourth theme indicated that the majority of special educators did not feel exceptional learner ready on day one for student behaviors.

**Theme 5: Special Education Teachers with a Strong Sense of Self-Efficacy Received Support from Various Sources in Their Teaching Career**

Participants navigated many challenges, including student behavior, with the support of others, especially their teaching colleagues. Three subthemes emerged from the data in the area of support: (a) as beginning special education teachers, participants relied heavily on support from special education teacher colleagues and less on the assistance of assigned mentors; (b) they had varying experiences and perceptions of support from administrators at school and district levels; and (c), overall, participants did not view district professional development as a source of support.
As beginning special education teachers, participants relied heavily on support from special education teacher colleagues and less on the assistance of assigned mentors. All participants revealed beneficial experiences with supportive colleagues as they began their teaching careers. They found the input of their teaching colleagues helpful when they had questions about classroom management, case management, and classroom arrangement. When Donna started working at her school two weeks after the school year began, she struggled to keep her students seated so she could teach. She recalled, “I asked for advice from people here and my mentor. I did everything they told me to do and it slowly got better” (780-782). Donna, who included the school social worker, psychologist, and speech language pathologist among those who advised her on behavior management, explained, “They’ve known the kids a lot longer than I have, so I can go to them if I’m having an issue with [a student and ask,] ‘What have you done in the past with them?’” (440-442).

As new educators, participants sought guidance from others to learn about aspects of case management such as completing IEP documents, conducting testing, and writing evaluation reports. Tina, who questioned how to collect data to assess students’ progress on their IEP goals and objectives, remembered, “I met with a lot of my co-workers . . . and they shared with me how they did it” (362-364). Her colleagues also worked with her to write her first several IEPs. When she arrived in the district as a first-year teacher, Beth relied on the knowledge of a teacher who taught a similar self-contained class in her school. Her colleague shared with her IEP resources that she had received from others in the district.
As Donna prepared for her first reevaluation of a student, a special education colleague started the assessment while Donna observed. Donna then completed a portion of the test with the assistance of her colleague, who then observed Donna conduct the final sections independently. When the district implemented three new assessments for achievement testing, she depended on a colleague to show her how to score them. She referred to the evaluation template of another teacher in order to write her evaluation report. Krista recounted her first year of teaching at a high school where she also relied on her special education colleagues for help with scoring achievement testing. Although the tests were scored by a computer program, she had to “figure out how to input [the data] and make sure I was getting the score reports right. . . . I had to bother them quite often” (587-589).

Melissa also sought assistance from special education teachers in her previous school, including one with whom she shared a classroom. She added that the elementary teachers in the building provided her with valuable feedback about her students’ performance in the general classroom, which enabled her to plan instruction more effectively. Allison recalled two former colleagues who gave her helpful advice on IEP documents when she was new to the district. Recalling her “minimal” (264) teacher preparation many years earlier, she said her case management knowledge mostly was “acquired from co-workers” (597-598).

When she arrived at her current school to teach a new self-contained class and struggled to find furniture and materials for her small classroom, Allison encountered supportive colleagues. Allison acknowledged, “I’m so grateful to the resource teachers [who] said . . . ‘Here’s what we have that we could share with you,’” and showed her where to locate tables, chairs, and a desk (640-641, 651-652). This “phenomenal” team also
advised her about the needs of students on her caseload (649). As she worked to establish this program for middle school students, she was encouraged by “feedback from staff in the building, and even administrators, when they’re not hanging up on me” (738-739). Participants relied on the support of their colleagues, even though they were assigned mentors when they were new to the profession.

Teachers reported varying levels of support from the mentors with whom they were paired by district leaders to fulfill the state requirement for new educators. Some participants were assigned mentors who taught in different buildings or subject areas. Tina, whose mentor worked in another school within the district, recalled, “My mentor was a regular ed teacher. She [taught] first grade and she was great. She pointed me to a lot of great resources, but she wasn’t special ed certified, so . . . she really couldn’t guide me specifically in that direction” (381-385). First-year teacher Donna, who had a mentor assigned to her at the time of the interview, shared that her mentor was a special education teacher in different building. She said, “She can really only help me so much” (411-412), but noted, “We go to the same gym, so I see her there” (416).

Melissa, whose mentor was an English language arts teacher in the same building, shared, “The mentor was helpful, except that I was paired with a mentor who was a middle school teacher and not special ed” (466-467). Beth’s mentor was the library media specialist at her school. She said, “I have no complaints about her. She was awesome, but she wasn’t a special ed teacher, so she couldn’t offer anything to me. . . . She would tell me, ‘I really can’t help you’. . . . I didn’t always necessarily go to her for ideas” (742-744, 748, 751-752).
Krista stated, “I really liked my mentor [but] I don’t think she was helpful” (785). Her mentor, a special education teacher in the same building, was her mentor for two years, including the year she transferred from the high school to an elementary building in the district. She explained, “My second year, I was still supposed to report to her. I would send her emails. . . . I would have to reach out. She wouldn’t reach out” (798-801). Now as a more experienced teacher who saw some of her colleagues visit their mentees’ classrooms, she expressed the following:

I wish I had [a mentor] telling me, “You’re doing this really well, but why don’t you do this?” Instead of administration always doing my observations, it would have been nice to have had that conversation. I do wish that was something I had a little bit more of. (809-814)

In addition to mentors, participants had varied experiences with support from administrators.

**Participants had diverse experiences and perceptions of support from administrators at school and district levels.** Four participants expressed diverse perspectives about the support of administrators. Tina, who started her career in the school district in a school for pre-kindergarten students with disabilities, stated that her principal was supportive. Well-versed in special education, the principal assisted Tina in her office with her first several IEPs. Tina said her principal “went above and beyond, if [I] had any questions at any time, whether it was at school, in the morning or at night” (376-377). Tina explained that the supportive environment led by the principal impacted her confidence. She stated the following:
It’s a huge community . . . that really cares about one another. Everybody over there goes over the top to make sure that you understand and have what you need. So I really think that most of my experience in confidence, especially in this field, came from working directly with certain people . . . who were really good at what they did, and . . . absorbing everything that they said and everything that they gave. (602-610)

When she arrived at her school to start a new self-contained class, Beth faced the additional responsibility of setting up her empty classroom. Beth, who did not anticipate this challenge, sought the guidance of the special education supervisor assigned to the school. She admitted, “I know I’m new, and I hate to tell you this, [but] I don’t know what I’m doing. I don’t know how to set up the classroom” (639-641). The supervisor enlisted the help of two special education teachers from similar programs, including one from another school, to assist her with the arrangement and organization of the classroom during the professional development days prior to the start of the school year. Beth noted that one of her paraprofessionals also contributed substantial support to this considerable task.

Melissa, whose experiences with administrators in her current school were detailed in the fourth theme, shared that the administrators at her previous school where she was a resource teacher were supportive. She stated, “I feel like administration [there] is usually pretty grateful for your help . . . because they’re glad you’re there. They need you. . . . That sense of being needed is nice” (711-715). Krista also felt supported by her principal, who used school budget funds to send her to professional development workshops that she requested to attend.
Allison had challenging experiences with administrator support, especially during her first year in the district when she worked at three different schools. Admittedly feeling unprepared to teach, she sought assistance from several administrators on multiple occasions. When she asked a special education supervisor if she could observe a teacher administer an achievement test with which she was not familiar, she was told, “No, we don’t have time for that,” and was advised to search for instructional videos online (450-451). She also asked if she could receive training on the system used by the district to create IEP documents. One supervisor told her, “No, you’ve got to figure it out” (457-458), and a supervisor at a different school replied, “You’re on your own” (486). When she asked an assistant principal if she could use her printer to generate a PPT invitation, she was refused. Allison, who reported finding supportive administrators in her third placement that year, also had varied experiences with professional development.

**Participants overall did not view district professional development as a source of support.** Although three participants reported several positive professional development experiences related to behavior as discussed in the fourth theme, four participants discussed lacking aspects of district-led professional development activities. Participants frequently expressed frustration over required attendance at workshops that were not relevant to their positions.

Allison wished that professional development workshops were more applicable to her position as a self-contained teacher of students with multiple disabilities. She frequently was assigned to workshops that were designed for teachers of lower functioning students. She wished she could attend workshops that provided her with materials she could use with her
students. Melissa stated that special education teachers often were required to attend general education workshops intended for English language arts and mathematics teachers; special education workshops were not planned for all professional development days.

Tina cited several professional development workshops presented by the district in recent years that were helpful, such as trainings on an autism curriculum for upper elementary students and an assessment tool for language and social skills that she used regularly. She was discouraged, however, by frequent requirements to attend professional development workshops together with the teachers of her school on afternoons when students were dismissed from school early. She reported that these trainings often focused on literacy programs or small group intervention programs that she did not have access to or were not appropriate for her students. She related the following:

There are so many great options out there and so many [trainings] that would be more beneficial to different groups [of teachers]. I know it’s costly . . . so they can’t always do it, but nothing drives me more crazy than when I have to sit through PD specific to my building on those half days. (478-483)

She also stated that being given opportunities to collaborate with other teachers in the autism program or to “go [with them] to one school and hear about a certain procedure that we can use or a certain technique . . . would be so much more beneficial” (492-494).

Krista articulated, “Professional development and training are very limited, and usually pertain to district initiatives rather than student needs” (12-13). A self-described “PD nerd,” (930) she sought out opportunities offered outside of the district. She attended several workshops, some of which were held in the summer, on topics such as reading instruction
and dyslexia. Krista, who routinely shared the information with colleagues upon her return, voiced, “I’ll tell everyone about it if I really like it [and] if I think it’s going to help our kids” (935-936).

Professional development was not viewed by urban special educators as a source of support overall. Teachers also had varying perceptions of administrator support based on their experiences with building and district level leaders. Interview data revealed that participants, especially at the beginning of their careers, relied less on their assigned mentors for support and considerably more on their special education teacher colleagues. The fifth theme indicated that participants with a strong sense of self-efficacy received support from a variety of sources.

The fourth and fifth themes that emerged from the data resulted in the second finding: Although they felt challenged by some of the responsibilities of their teaching positions such as managing student behavior, many special education teachers developed a strong sense of self-efficacy over time, due in part to the assistance they received from their colleagues. These themes and findings contributed to the analysis of the research questions.

Discussion of Research Questions

Research Question 1 Analysis

Data from demographic surveys and interviews were used to answer the first research question: How do urban special education teachers experience their teaching responsibilities in relation to their expectations based on their teacher preparation program experiences? Participants expressed that the extent of their responsibilities as teachers exceeded their
expectations as pre-service teachers, and their preparation for some aspects of teaching was insufficient for the responsibilities they encountered as teachers.

As indicated by the first theme, participants completed teacher preparation programs that were diverse in requirements, support, and perceived value. Their programs, which they completed at public and private colleges and universities in several different states, varied in terms of coursework, observations, internships, and student teaching experiences. They experienced varying levels of support from their cooperating teachers in their student teaching assignments, which ranged in length, setting, and grade level. Participants had contrasting perceptions of the value of these requirements.

The diversity of their teacher preparation programs, especially their student teaching experiences, impacted participants’ perceptions of their preparedness for teaching, as evidenced by the second theme. They recalled varying levels of preparedness for instructional intervention and workload upon the completion of their teacher preparation programs. Reflecting on her first year of teaching, Melissa stated, “I don’t think I expected to have so many grade levels to . . . work with. . . . Creating my own schedule . . . was difficult because I wasn’t expecting that either” (347-350).

Participants felt limited by the experiences they had as pre-service teachers. Beth recalled a challenging adjustment to her position in a self-contained classroom, which was unlike her observational, internship, or student teaching settings. Based on her program and student teaching experience, Donna felt prepared to teach in inclusion and resource classrooms but not in a self-contained setting. Krista, who worked primarily with elementary
level students throughout her teacher preparation program, felt prepared to work in a co-taught classroom but did not feel prepared to teach high school, the setting of her first job.

Krista’s student teaching placement in a fourth-grade co-taught classroom led her to choose a career in special education rather than general elementary education. She recalled the following about her student teaching experience in a co-taught classroom:

I liked the relationship my cooperating teachers had with each other. . . . It was a beautiful relationship. They would pick each other's sentences off and . . . I saw how much the kids were growing because of that relationship (62-67).

As an elementary special educator, she preferred the co-taught model rather than the resource room for service delivery; she believed most of her students could learn effectively in an inclusion setting where she and the general education teacher provided differentiation and small groups for all students. Notably, other participants of the current study indicated neither training in their preparation programs for co-teaching nor experience with this model as in-service teachers.

Despite receiving some instruction in their teacher preparation programs, participants felt unprepared for case management and classroom management responsibilities when behaviors escalated, and students were in danger of being harmed. They relied on the support of their teaching colleagues to navigate these challenges. Some participants attended school district-sponsored workshops on behavior management. As evidenced by the fourth theme, the majority of teachers did not feel prepared at the beginning of their career to manage student behaviors.
Research Question 2 Analysis

Data from the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013) and interviews were used to answer the second research question: How do urban special education teachers perceive their self-efficacy in their current position? A total of 34 special education teachers from various settings across the school district completed the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale with an average score of 130.9 out of a possible 144 points. A sample of six participants who met the following criteria participated in semi-structured interviews: (a) five or fewer years of experience teaching special education; (b) pre-service or in-service experience working with students with learning disabilities in inclusion, co-taught, or resource room settings; and (c) scores among the highest on the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale. Participants were also selected based on a balanced representation of pre-service and in-service experiences in elementary, middle, and high school grade levels. The interviews were analyzed through descriptive coding.

Data from interviews revealed that these participants perceived themselves as confident in their ability to teach. They attributed their confidence to a variety of pre-service and in-service sources, including student teaching, successful curriculum development for their students, student progress, management of large caseloads, effective behavior management, and support from their colleagues. Allison remarked the following:

I gained a lot of confidence in how to access materials where I went from zero to a good 90% now. . . . I’m seeing growth and . . . positive changes with the students. So I feel much, much more confident now. (729-733)
Donna reflected, “If I were to go to another district and have a caseload of . . . 16 or 17 kids, it would be . . . absolutely nothing compared to what I’ve done here” (622-625).

**Research Question 3 Analysis**

Participants’ responses to open-ended reflective prompts contributed to the third research question: What do special education teachers identify as rewards and challenges that they experience in an urban school district? Participants identified numerous challenges in their work as urban special educators. The challenge they most frequently addressed in the open-ended reflective prompts was the lack of resources for a large student population with diverse needs, including materials, staffing, training, curriculum, support, classroom supplies and furniture, and planning time.

Participants reflected on additional challenges they faced as teachers. The lack of parental involvement posed an obstacle when addressing problematic student behaviors. Behavior also made it difficult for teachers to deliver instruction to small groups of students. The completion of IEP documents for large caseloads of students while maintaining a daily teaching schedule also was viewed as challenging. The management of multiple paraprofessionals, some of whom experienced conflicts with one another, presented an additional challenge to teachers in self-contained classrooms.

Participants also identified many rewards of teaching special education in an urban setting. Teachers found it fulfilling to work with a diverse population in a community in which they served as a source of stability in the lives of disadvantaged students. They also found it rewarding to work with students with greater academic and emotional needs than in
other school settings. Teachers felt that they made a difference in students’ lives when students responded to their effort to support them and form relationships with them.

Participants acknowledged that it was rewarding to witness the academic and behavioral progress of students, particularly those in self-contained programs with whom teachers worked for multiple years. Teachers also found it fulfilling to see the emotional growth and increased confidence of students who successfully learned strategies to improve their behavior. Opportunities to collaborate with parents who were active in their children’s education also were viewed as rewarding. Additionally, some participants cited the satisfaction of having withstood multiple obstacles in order to create effective programs. Finally, collaboration with colleagues to develop strategies to improve student outcomes and strengthen their teaching skills was identified as a rewarding experience.

Summary

The purposes of this study were to understand urban special education teachers’ perceptions of their self-efficacy and preparedness to teach students with learning disabilities, and to gain insight into experiences teachers identified as rewarding or challenging. Five themes and two main findings emerged from the data, which resulted from a demographic survey, the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013), semi-structured interviews, and open-ended reflective prompts.

Five overarching themes were identified: (a) Special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy participated in teacher preparation programs that varied in requirements, support, and perceived value; (b) Special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy recalled having varying perceptions of their preparedness for teaching
upon the completion of their teacher preparation programs; (c) Special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy readily identified specific challenges and rewards in their teaching positions; (d) The majority of special education teachers did not feel exceptional learner ready on day one for student behaviors; and (e) Special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy received support from various sources in their teaching career.

The first three themes led to the identification of the first main finding: While they had varying perceptions of their preparedness to teach when they completed their teacher preparation programs, many special educators with a strong sense of self-efficacy believed they were making a difference in the lives of their students, despite a lack of resources. Analysis of the fourth and fifth themes resulted in the second finding: Although they felt challenged by some of the responsibilities of their teaching positions such as managing student behavior, many special education teachers developed a strong sense of self-efficacy over time, due in part to the assistance they received from their colleagues. The implications of the themes and findings of this research study are discussed in Chapter 5, in which recommendations and conclusions are presented.
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter provides a summary and the conclusions of this research study. This chapter presents an overview of the study and addresses the following sections for each of three research questions: (a) review of the results, (b) discussion, (c) implications for education, and (d) implications for future research. The chapter concludes with a section about trustworthiness and a final summary.

Overview of the Study

The purposes of this qualitative study were to understand urban special educators’ perceptions of their self-efficacy and preparedness to teach students with learning disabilities, and to gain insight into experiences teachers identified as rewarding and challenging. Using purposive sampling, 178 special education teachers from one urban school district in the Northeast United States were invited to participate in a demographic survey and the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013). Completed instruments were received from 34 participants. Six participants were selected to participate in semi-structured interviews and open-ended reflective prompts based on the following criteria: (a) five or fewer years of experience teaching special education; (b) pre-service or in-service experience working with students with learning disabilities in inclusion, co-taught, or resource room settings; and (c) scores among the highest on the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013). This purposeful sample was also selected to achieve a balanced representation of participants’ experiences across elementary, middle, and high school grade levels.
Data for this multiple case study design were analyzed through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). First and second cycle coding techniques were used to organize data, identify patterns, group data into categories, and establish themes (Miles et al., 2014).

This study produced five emergent themes: (a) Special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy participated in teacher preparation programs that varied in requirements, support, and perceived value; (b) Special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy recalled having varying perceptions of their preparedness for teaching upon the completion of their teacher preparation programs; (c) Special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy readily identified specific challenges and rewards in their teaching positions; (d) The majority of special education teachers did not feel exceptional learner ready on day one for student behaviors; and (e) Special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy received support from various sources in their teaching career.

Analysis of these themes resulted in two main findings of the study. First, while they had varying perceptions of their preparedness to teach when they completed their teacher preparation programs, many special educators with a strong sense of self-efficacy believed they were making a difference in the lives of their students, despite a lack of resources. Second, although they felt challenged by some of the responsibilities of their teaching positions such as managing student behavior, many special education teachers developed a strong sense of self-efficacy over time, due in part to the assistance they received from their colleagues.
Data were used to answer the following research questions:

1. How do urban special education teachers experience their teaching responsibilities in relation to their expectations based on their teacher preparation program experiences?
2. How do urban special education teachers perceive their self-efficacy in their current position?
3. What do special education teachers identify as rewards and challenges that they experience in an urban school district?

The results are reviewed in relation to the research questions in the following section.

**Review of Results**

**Research Question 1**

The first research question asked, “How do urban special education teachers experience their teaching responsibilities in relation to their expectations based on their teacher preparation program experiences?” Data obtained from the demographic survey and semi-structured interviews revealed valuable insight about teachers’ experiences and expectations of their careers.

Participants attended teacher preparation programs at public and private colleges and universities in four states that varied greatly in requirements for coursework, observations, internships, and student teaching placements. Those who completed teacher preparation programs at universities located in cities received pre-service experience in urban settings. Teachers reported differences in their programs in terms of cooperating teacher support and perceived value. Given the differences between programs, there was no distinct preparation pathway that impacted a strong sense of self-efficacy.
Data indicated that participants’ in-service teaching responsibilities, which included instructional, managerial, behavioral, and case management duties, were greater than they expected when they were enrolled in teacher preparation programs. In addition, they felt insufficiently prepared for some of the responsibilities of their teaching positions.

Participants’ responses to interview questions reflected varying levels of preparedness for instructional intervention and workload. Some participants felt prepared to deliver instructional intervention to students with disabilities, while others felt less prepared, particularly in the area of reading. Some educators received insight into the extent of a teachers’ workload while they were pre-service teachers, while others did not expect the amount of work they encountered in their positions.

Overall, participants felt unprepared for case management and classroom management, despite receiving some instruction in these areas in their teacher preparation programs. They indicated a lack of preparation to manage student behavior and the full extent of case management duties, notably the completion of assessments, evaluations, and IEP documents for large caseloads of students.

Despite receiving some instruction in their teacher preparation programs, the majority of participants did not feel prepared at the beginning of their careers to manage student behaviors. Early career special educators in inclusion, resource, and self-contained settings found it challenging to manage the severe behavior of students; however, teachers in self-contained classrooms received more behavior training provided by the school district than teachers who worked in other settings. Additionally, some participants lacked needed behavioral support from building administrators.
At the time of the interviews, three of the six case study participants were teaching in the positions for which they were hired by the school district originally. Two teachers who initially were hired for resource positions were transferred involuntarily to self-contained classrooms in subsequent years. One participant requested a transfer from her original assignment in co-taught and resource classes at the high school level to an elementary position. It is unknown if participants perceived a hierarchy in which beginning teachers were assigned to more challenging classrooms while experienced teachers taught in more desirable settings. No participants expressed views in this area.

Research Question 2

The second research question asked, “How do urban special education teachers perceive their self-efficacy in their current position?” Data obtained from the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013) and interviews revealed participants’ perceptions about their self-efficacy as urban special educators.

Completed responses from the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013), which was used for descriptive purposes and to identify potential participants for the semi-structured interviews and open-ended reflective prompts, were received from 34 special education teachers. These participants, who worked in a wide range of special education settings in buildings across the school district, included early through late career educators. The average score of all participants was 130.9 out of 144 possible points.

A sample of six participants who met the following criteria were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews and open-ended reflective prompts: (a) five or fewer years of
experience teaching special education; (b) pre-service or in-service experience working with
students with learning disabilities in inclusion, co-taught, or resource room settings; and (c)
scores among the highest on the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale. These
participants were also selected based on a balanced representation of pre-service and in-
service experiences in elementary, middle, and high school grade levels. The average score
of these educators was 131.7 points.

Interview data revealed that these participants perceived themselves as confident in
their ability to teach. They attributed their confidence to numerous pre-service and in-service
experiences, including student teaching experiences with supportive cooperating teachers and
experience with creating curriculum for their students. They also stated that the academic,
social, and behavioral progress of their students, especially those with whom they worked for
several consecutive years, contributed to their confidence as teachers.

In addition, participants credited the growth of their confidence to successful
management of large caseloads, effective behavior management of their students, and
support from their colleagues. As new teachers, they relied more heavily on the support of
their special education colleagues than on the advice of their assigned mentors, many of
whom either taught different subjects or worked in other buildings.

**Research Question 3**

Participants’ responses to open-ended reflective prompts produced data that were
used to answer the third research question, which asked, “What do special education teachers
identify as rewards and challenges that they experience in an urban school district?”

Teachers shared extensive insight into the challenges and rewards of working with large
caseloads of students with disabilities in an urban setting. The challenge they most frequently stated was the lack of resources. They discussed lacking materials such as curriculum, supplies, and furniture, as well as staffing, training, support, and planning time.

Participants also stated that inadequate parental involvement posed a challenge, especially when dealing with student behavior. Severe behavior of students challenged teachers and interrupted their daily schedules of small group instruction. Additional difficulties cited by participants included management of multiple paraprofessionals in a classroom and timely completion of IEP documents for large caseloads of students.

Although participants shared their frustration about numerous challenges in their teaching positions, they easily described many rewards in their careers as special educators. They believed it was rewarding to work with disadvantaged children in a diverse community where they had the potential to be a source of stability for their students. Although the work presented many challenges, participants found it rewarding to teach students with greater academic and emotional needs, especially when they witnessed their growth and success.

Teachers found their work fulfilling when they saw positive changes in their students’ behavior and confidence following the successful use of behavioral strategies. They also found it rewarding to work with parents who were involved in their children’s education, and to collaborate with colleagues to improve their teaching skills and the learning outcomes of students. Finally, some participants identified the overcoming of obstacles, such as the lack of resources to establish effective programs for their students, as rewarding. In the following section, a comparison between related literature and the findings of this study is presented.


**Discussion**

**Research Question 1**

Literature related to teacher preparation programs and preparation for behavior and classroom management, co-teaching, and case management is compared and contrasted with the insight shared by participants in this study based on the first research question: How do urban special education teachers experience their teaching responsibilities in relation to their expectations based on their teacher preparation program experiences?

Zhang and Zeller (2016) stated that teachers who became certified through lateral entry and alternative programs were less likely to continue teaching and reported feeling less prepared to teach than teachers who earned their teaching credentials through traditional programs. In this study, all six case study participants graduated from traditional teacher preparation programs. These programs, which participants accessed at undergraduate and graduate levels at different institutions in several states, varied in requirements. Upon completion of their programs, participants in this study recalled varying levels of preparation for instructional intervention and workload, while participants overall reported feeling unprepared for classroom and case management duties. Despite earning certification through traditional programs, participants in the current study felt unprepared for teaching in some respects.

Ricci et al. (2017), who conducted research on the perceptions of pre-service special education teachers who participated in urban co-teaching fieldwork placements, found that fieldwork experiences contributed to their growth as teachers. Participants indicated that positive relationships with their co-teaching mentors contributed to their success in the
classroom and allowed them to focus on the needs of their students. This research coincides with some findings of the current study. In this study, one participant spoke in detail about her preparation and enthusiasm for co-teaching; however, no other participants indicated pre-service or in-service experience with this model.

Freeman et al. (2014), who stated that classroom management skills are essential to the success of novice teachers and student achievement, found that requirements in this area were greater in special education teacher preparation programs than in elementary and secondary general education programs. Flower et al. (2017) found that 89% of university special education programs included specific courses or fieldwork experiences pertaining to behavior and classroom management. In the current study, participants recalled varying experiences with coursework and preparation for managing challenging student behavior.

Although some participants recalled basic instruction about classroom management in their courses, they felt unprepared overall for the severe behavior they witnessed as new teachers. Participant Donna reported taking a semester-long course on emotional disturbance and behavior disorders; however, she struggled to apply her knowledge from the course to challenging situations with students. Although research has indicated that special education teacher preparation programs require more behavior and classroom management content than general education programs, the findings of this study suggest that behavior management content is insufficient preparation for the range of behavior encountered by new teachers. These findings coincide with those of Freeman et al. (2014), who determined that pre-service training may be inadequate due to lack of exposure to classroom management content.
The results of this study also correspond with those in recent literature which indicate that special education teachers, especially those new to the profession, often are overwhelmed by case management responsibilities (Bettini et al., 2017; Cancio et al., 2018; Whitaker, 2003). Whitaker (2003) found that novice special educators needed more assistance in the area of system information, which included IEP paperwork, than in emotional support, materials, instruction, and discipline. Whitaker also stated that fellow special education teachers were the greatest source of assistance to new teachers. In the current study, case management was also an area for which participants reported feeling unprepared and for which they received more assistance from special education colleagues than other sources such as general education teachers or administrators.

**Research Question 2**

Research on the self-efficacy of special education teachers is compared with the findings of the current study in relation to the second research question: How do urban special education teachers perceive their self-efficacy in their current position?

Coladarci and Breton (1997) found that teachers who expressed greater job satisfaction, as well as teachers who were older, indicated slightly higher self-efficacy than other participants in their study of the relationship between special education teacher efficacy and supervision. In comparison, results of the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013) in the current study indicated that some but not all teachers with more years of experience scored higher than less experienced teachers.

This finding concurs with the research of Dawson and Scott (2013), who reported that years of teaching experience positively impacted the self-efficacy of special educators in the
area of teacher support, which referred to teachers’ ability to establish positive relationships with students with disabilities. In addition, they found that teachers’ amount of special education coursework was a significant positive predictor of self-efficacy. In the current study, the early-career teachers, who achieved relatively high scores on the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale, all attended teacher certification programs.

In their research, Wang et al. (2017) identified three sources of high-self efficacy: (a) teachers’ knowledge of students, (b) rapport with students, and (c) previous work experiences. Similarly, participants with a strong sense of self-efficacy in the current study identified rewarding experiences such as working with parents, serving as a source of stability for their students, forming positive relationships with students, and striving to improve their self-esteem. One participant in the current study, Beth, spoke at length about the impact her previous job as a group home supervisor had on her teaching career. She stated that this prior work experience prepared her to manage multiple paraprofessionals in her classroom and address work-related issues as they arose.

**Research Question 3**

The results of this study are also compared with research related to the third research question: What do special education teachers identify as rewards and challenges that they experience in an urban school district?

Participants in the current study most frequently identified the lack of resources, such as curriculum, supplies, furniture, staffing, training, support, and planning time, as their greatest challenge as urban special educators. These teachers also identified insufficient parental involvement as a challenge, especially when dealing with difficult student behavior.
that interrupted instruction. They named additional challenges of managing multiple paraprofessionals and case management duties for large numbers of students.

These findings concur with those of Stempien and Loeb (2002), who stated that early career special educators of students with emotional and behavioral difficulties were most challenged by inadequate materials, students with behavioral problems, unmotivated and uncooperative students, the training of paraprofessionals, and providing guidance to parents. The lack of visible progress by students despite teachers’ efforts posed an additional challenge.

Similarly, Conderman and Johnston-Rodriguez (2009) stated that the areas beginning teachers found most challenging were collaboration with others due to differences in philosophy and style, differentiation of instruction, lack of resources and time, and issues with behavior and motivation. In addition, special educators specified working effectively with at-risk students and their families as a challenge.

Stempien and Loeb (2002) also identified several areas that special education teachers found rewarding, such as working with their students, observing their progress, and interacting with colleagues. According to Conderman and Johnston-Rodriguez (2009), early career special education teachers found working with a diverse population of students and families rewarding. In the current study, participants found it rewarding to work with a diverse population of students for whom they could be a source of stability, and to observe the growth of students with various academic and emotional needs. Participants in this study also identified positive changes in student behavior due to successful behavioral strategies, collaboration with colleagues, and involved parents as satisfying. In addition, some
participants identified instances in which they overcame obstacles, such as a lack of resources, to establish effective programs for their students as fulfilling experiences. These findings have multiple implications for the education profession.

Implications for Education

The findings of this study in conjunction with related literature resulted in numerous implications for education professionals including pre-service and in-service teachers, school administrators, and administrators of teacher preparation programs. These implications are discussed in the context of each research question.

Research Question 1

The first research question asked, “How do urban special education teachers experience their teaching responsibilities in relation to their expectations based on their teacher preparation program experiences?” Findings of this study indicated that participants, who completed teacher preparation programs that varied in requirements, support, and perceived value, felt unprepared for some responsibilities of their teaching positions. They indicated varying levels of preparedness for instructional intervention and workload, and overall unpreparedness for the responsibilities of classroom and case management. They also reported that these responsibilities, especially the management of student behavior, were greater than they anticipated as pre-service teachers. Their teacher preparation program requirements, which included observations, internships, and student teaching experiences of varying duration, depth, and location, did not necessarily mirror the settings and challenges of their early-career teaching positions, which included self-contained classrooms and severe behavior.
Novice teachers across special education settings found behavior management difficult, though teachers in self-contained settings received more school district sponsored behavior training than teachers in other settings. Some participants also reported a lack of behavioral support from building administrators.

These findings result in several implications, many of which were suggested by participants themselves. First, based on the information provided by participants about their teacher preparation programs, there appeared to be a lack of consistency across programs in requirements for observations, internships, and student teaching. More uniform requirements could provide pre-service teachers with a greater opportunity to gain a breadth of experience in multiple settings. In addition, some participants did not feel prepared for the settings of their first jobs because they did not experience them in their pre-service programs; therefore, teacher candidates should gain pre-service exposure to the wide range of settings and grade levels in which their certification would permit them to teach, including high school, rural and urban settings, and, if granted access, self-contained programs for students with moderate to severe disabilities and challenging behavior.

Participants also voiced a need for more instruction about and exposure to severe behavior in pre-service years and greater support from their school districts as beginning teachers. One participant suggested that professors of teacher preparation programs should teach more content about the severity of behavioral challenges a new teacher may encounter. Several participants wished they had received more instruction about and pre-service teaching experience with emotional disturbance, which one participant suggested should not be limited to specialized graduate programs. Notably, several participants indicated that, if
they had received more pre-service exposure to emotional disturbance, the severity of student behaviors would not have deterred them from entering the profession. Teacher candidates would benefit from not only additional coursework in behavior management but also supported experience in applying the knowledge to stressful situations with students. Tina also stated a need for ongoing district sponsored behavioral support training commencing at the start of employment.

In addition, participants expressed a desire for more thorough preparation for case management responsibilities, such as additional practice completing IEP documents and writing evaluation reports, and opportunities to attend more PPT meetings during student teaching placements. It would benefit novice teachers if teacher preparation program administrators, in collaboration with receiving school administrators, implemented minimum case management requirements for student teaching experiences, such as a minimum number of IEPs, assessments, evaluation reports, and PPTs attended for successful program completion.

Beth also stated a need for more training in “the types of problems you come across” as a new teacher, such as communicating with and supporting parents who have disabilities (891-892). She also suggested the addition of a supervisory course for pre-service teachers in which they could learn how to supervise, utilize, and evaluate paraprofessionals effectively. Based on Beth’s experience as a first-year teacher who entered an unfurnished classroom with no existing resources, pre-service teachers would benefit from instruction on how to set up an empty classroom for a newly established program.
In summary, beginning teachers would benefit greatly from teacher preparation programs with rigorous, consistent requirements for observations, internships, and student teaching placements that offer more comprehensive preparation for challenging settings including urban self-contained classrooms. Novice educators would benefit from initial and ongoing support provided by school districts in not only instructional intervention but also behavior and case management. The combination of both strong pre-service preparation and in-service support potentially would improve the rate of retention of special education teachers in urban schools.

**Research Question 2**

The second research question asked, “How do urban special education teachers perceive their self-efficacy in their current position?” The Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scales (Dawson & Scott, 2013), which were administered to 34 participants, resulted in an average score of 130.9 out of 144 points. Six teachers who participated in semi-structured interviews and open-ended reflective prompts credited their confidence to student teaching experiences with supportive cooperating teachers, experience with designing and implementing curriculum, and the progress of their students in academic, social, and behavioral domains. They also attributed their confidence to the endurance of large caseloads, effective behavior management, and support from colleagues. They relied more on the assistance of other special education teachers than their assigned mentors who often taught in different subject areas or school locations. Participants overall did not consider district professional development as a source of support.
Several implications result from these findings. As student teachers, participants found some but not all of their cooperating teachers very supportive; some allowed limited responsibilities and access to student information. Comprehensive training for cooperating teachers by university professors would establish more consistent expectations and broader experiences for student teachers.

Improvements to the process of matching mentors and mentees for the state required mentoring program would benefit new teachers as well. An increased number of experienced special education teachers should be trained to serve as mentors, ensuring that new educators are paired with mentors who share the same subject area and teach in the same building. Not only would this change provide new teachers with greater commonality with their mentors, but also it would improve access to each other, allowing mentors to observe their mentees.

Changes to professional development trainings also would benefit novice teachers. While some participants named several helpful past workshops, participants overall felt that district-led professional development activities frequently were irrelevant to the duties of their current positions. Offering professional development opportunities related to the range of special education settings, especially on the topic of behavior management, would provide teachers with practical information and resources they could implement in their classrooms. In the absence of workshops for teachers of specific self-contained programs, participants expressed a need for more time to collaborate with teachers of similar programs in the district. These improvements to professional development would provide new teachers with a reliable source of information and support.
In addition, administrator development could improve the quality of support provided to teachers, especially in behavior management. Administrators should be provided with comprehensive training in behavior support, preparing them to respond effectively to novice teachers’ requests for help with students. The improvements described in this section would provide greater pre-service and in-service support to new teachers, particularly in mentorship, professional development, and administrator support, all of which could positively impact the retention of urban special educators.

**Research Question 3**

The third research question asked, “What do special education teachers identify as rewards and challenges that they experience in an urban school district?” The challenge most frequently named by participants was the lack of resources, such as curriculum, supplies, furniture, staffing, training, support, and planning time. Teachers also cited inadequate parental involvement, and management of paraprofessionals and large caseloads of students as additional challenges. They discussed many rewards including teaching disadvantaged students with academic and emotional needs in a diverse community, serving in a role that provided stability for students, and witnessing students’ growth and success. They named positive behavioral changes as the result of strategies, working with involved parents, and collaborating with colleagues as further rewards of their teaching positions. They also viewed their ability to overcome obstacles, such as the lack of resources, to create effective programs for students as professionally satisfying.

These findings result in several implications for educators. New teachers would benefit from a reduced caseload of students during their first year when they are adjusting to
many new responsibilities. They also should receive instruction from district leaders about the management and utilization of paraprofessionals, especially if their teacher preparation programs did not include this training. Beginning special education teachers in all classroom settings would also benefit from training in effective management of severe behavior, which participants witnessed in resource and inclusion settings. Participants’ candid insight about the rewards and challenges of their teaching careers also resulted in implications for future research.

**Implications for Future Research**

**Research Question 1**

There are implications for future research based on the findings related to the first research question: How do urban special education teachers experience their teaching responsibilities in relation to their expectations based on their teacher preparation program experiences?

Participants in this study earned their special education certification through undergraduate and graduate teacher preparation programs at public and private institutions in several states. A comparison of programs within one state would reveal variations among programs that prepare teachers, many of whom likely become educators in that state. Researchers also could examine the differences between undergraduate and graduate programs to determine how content and requirements differ. Additional research is needed on the utility of observations, internships, and other fieldwork components of teacher preparation programs. Data from this research would provide university administrators with insight into how to improve the effectiveness and depth of their programs.
Future research would be beneficial in the area of expectations. A comparison of the expectations of pre-service teachers at the start and end of their teacher preparation programs would yield data that could be used by administrators and professors of teacher preparation programs to establish realistic expectations about the teaching profession, particularly regarding the challenges of behavior and case management. Research into the preparedness of teacher candidates at the completion of their programs would provide information about their readiness for the extensive duties of a special education teacher.

Research specifically on the preparedness of new teachers for case management responsibilities would produce data that could inform university and school district leaders how to better prepare pre-service teachers and support novice teachers in this area. Additionally, research on the preparedness of new special educators to balance the myriad responsibilities of their positions including instructional, behavioral, and case management would yield insight that could lead to the development of training, support, and strategies offered by school districts. Such support could enable early career teachers to manage the responsibilities of large caseloads in urban schools more effectively.

**Research Question 2**

Implications for future research also derive from data related to the second research question: How do urban special education teachers perceive their self-efficacy in their current position?

In this study, self-efficacy was measured using the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013). In future studies, it would be worthwhile to use this scale to compare the self-efficacy of urban special education teachers
across inclusion, resource, and self-contained settings, and to compare the efficacy scores of urban teachers with teachers who work in suburban and rural settings. Development of an alternate scale specifically for urban contexts also might yield additional insight into the self-efficacy of teachers in this environment. Through observations, further research could reveal if teachers’ perceived self-efficacy originates from highly effective teaching or if it results to some degree from the successful endurance of the challenges present in urban schools.

As beginning teachers, participants in this study received support from various sources, including assigned mentors and special education colleagues. Researchers might consider studying special education teachers’ perceived utility of formal and informal mentoring relationships, as well as required professional development workshops offered by school districts. Comparisons of the perceived utility of both special education mentors and mentors from other disciplines within and outside of the mentees’ schools would also reveal valuable insight. Data from these studies would provide district administrators with beneficial information to guide decisions about supporting novice teachers.

**Research Question 3**

Implications for future research also emerged from the results of the third research question: What do special education teachers identify as rewards and challenges that they experience in an urban school district?

Researchers might consider studying aspects of the challenges identified by participants, specifically the management of large caseloads, lack of resources, inadequate parental involvement, severe behavior of students, and management of paraprofessionals. A comparison of novice and experienced teachers’ perceptions of these difficulties would
reveal insight into their abilities and decisions to persist in their careers despite the challenges. These data also could be used by district administrators to inform decisions such as increasing staff and offering training and support to address these difficulties.

Investigation into the rewards of teaching special education in urban schools also would produce valuable data. A comparison of early, mid-, and late career special educators could reveal if the perceived rewards of teaching change throughout the span of educators’ careers. Exploration into this area also could provide information about the relationship between job satisfaction and retention of teachers in urban school districts. Further studies could explain if the perceived rewards are sufficient to retain teachers in urban schools, or if, at some point in their careers, teachers perceive that the challenges outweigh the rewards, leading to the potential attrition of teachers.

Finally, teachers identified the ability to make a difference in the lives of urban students as a rewarding aspect of their careers. Future research could address to what extent this motivation retains teachers in urban districts, and if experienced teachers continue to identify this as a reward of teaching as they progress through their careers.

**Trustworthiness**

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the trustworthiness of a study is established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility, which refers to the accuracy of the research findings, was addressed through prolonged engagement with the subject matter and triangulation by different methods to obtain a broader understanding of participants. It was also addressed through
member checks in which participants were invited to review their transcribed interviews for accuracy and an internal audit (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Transferability involves providing a thick description of one’s study including all components and participants so that other researchers can apply the study to another setting. Transferability was addressed by describing the study in detail, designing it with applicability to other settings, designing it to include criteria for transferability, and utilizing purposive sampling (Anfara et al., 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability, which is the measure of how consistent or stable the data are over time, was addressed through overlap methods, peer examination, code-recode strategy, and an internal audit (Anfara et al., 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Confirmability, which refers to the neutrality of lack of bias in the study, was addressed through a confirmability audit. The confirmability audit, which examines the researcher’s work to confirm that data support the findings and interpretations, included an audit trail (Anfara et al., 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, a reflexive journal supported all four criteria of trustworthiness.

Summary

The purposes of this study were to explore urban special educators’ perceptions of their preparedness and self-efficacy to teach students with learning disabilities, and to learn about their rewarding and challenging experiences. Data for this multiple case study were gathered through a demographic survey, the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013), semi-structured interviews, and open-ended reflective prompts.
Five themes emerged from analysis of the data: (a) Special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy participated in teacher preparation programs that varied in requirements, support, and perceived value; (b) Special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy recalled having varying perceptions of their preparedness for teaching upon the completion of their teacher preparation programs; (c) Special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy readily identified specific challenges and rewards in their teaching positions; (d) The majority of special education teachers did not feel exceptional learner ready on day one for student behaviors; and (e) Special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy received support from various sources in their teaching career.

Two main findings resulted from analysis of the themes. First, while they had varying perceptions of their preparedness to teach when they completed their teacher preparation programs, many special educators with a strong sense of self-efficacy believed they were making a difference in the lives of their students, despite a lack of resources. Second, although they felt challenged by some of the responsibilities of their teaching positions such as managing student behavior, many special education teachers developed a strong sense of self-efficacy over time, due in part to the assistance they received from their colleagues. The themes and findings, and their implications for education and future research were reviewed and discussed through the context of three research questions.

In conclusion, the researcher explored the preparedness and self-efficacy of urban special education teachers and the career experiences they perceived as rewarding and challenging. This research, which may contribute to the existing body of knowledge about urban special educator self-efficacy, may inform administrators, teachers, and researchers
about the importance of enhancing pre-service and early career experiences to increase retention of urban special educators.
REFERENCES


doi:10.1155/2012/581352


doi:10.1177/1745691617699280


Coladearci, T., & Breton, W. A. (1997). Teacher efficacy, supervision, and the special
239. doi:10.1080/00220671.1997.10544577

Colorado Department of Education. (2015). *Definitions of selected terms.* Retrieved from
https://www.cde.state.co.us/edereval/rvdefine

doi:10.3200/PSFL.53.4.235-244

programs in Connecticut.* Retrieved from

for school year 2016-17: Waterbury School District.* Retrieved from

Connelly, V., & Graham, S. (2009). Student teaching and teacher attrition in special
doi:10.1177/0888406409339472

Council for Exceptional Children. (2019). *Professional standards and practice policies and
positions.* Retrieved from https://www.cec.sped.org/Standards/Professional-Policy-
and-Positions

CA: Sage Publications.


doi:10.1177/0014402914551737


doi:10.1177/0014402917690729


Appendices
Appendix A: Permission Letter to Superintendent
Dear Superintendent,

I am a student in the Ed.D. program in Instructional Leadership at Western Connecticut State University. For my dissertation research, I am interested in studying urban special educators’ perceptions of preparedness and self-efficacy to teach students with learning disabilities.

I am seeking your permission to conduct my study in this school district. Participants will be special education teachers who work with students with learning disabilities at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Data from all participants will be obtained from a demographic survey and the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale. A sample of six educators who have efficacy scores among the highest in the sample will participate in a 60-minute interview and complete two reflective prompts about their perceptions of skills needed to work with this population of students. Interviews, which will be conducted outside of the school day, will be audio recorded and transcribed. In appreciation of their time, participants in the interviews and reflective prompts will be given a $25 gift card.

This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Western Connecticut State University Institutional Review Board (Protocol #1718-113). Participation in this study is completely voluntary and participants may refuse to answer any question and are free to withdraw at any time.

Privacy will be protected. Participants’ identifying information will be removed from all data files and reported information. Data will be maintained in a secure location to protect confidentiality.

I wish to thank the administrators of the XXX Public Schools for considering participation in this study. You may contact me, Amy J. Carroll (carroll089@connect.wcsu.edu), or my dissertation advisor, Dr. Catherine O’Callaghan (ocallaghan@wcsu.edu), with questions.

Sincerely,
Amy J. Carroll
carroll089@connect.wcsu.edu

I agree that the study described above can be conducted in the XXX Public Schools.
Appendix B: Permission Letter to Principal
Dear Principal,

I am a student in the Ed.D. program in Instructional Leadership at Western Connecticut State University. For my dissertation research, I am interested in studying urban special educators’ perceptions of preparedness and self-efficacy to teach students with learning disabilities.

I am seeking your permission to conduct my study in your school. Participants will be special education teachers who work with students with learning disabilities at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Data from all participants will be obtained from a demographic survey and the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale. A sample of six educators who have efficacy scores among the highest in the sample will participate in a 60-minute interview and complete two reflective prompts about their perceptions of skills needed to work with this population of students. Interviews, which will be conducted outside of the school day, will be audio recorded and transcribed. In appreciate of their time, participants in the interviews and reflective prompts will be given a $25 gift card.

This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Western Connecticut State University Institutional Review Board (Protocol #1718-113). Participation in this study is completely voluntary and participants may refuse to answer any question and are free to withdraw at any time.

Privacy will be protected. Participants’ identifying information will be removed from all data files and reported information. Data will be maintained in a secure location to protect confidentiality.

I wish to thank you and your staff for considering participation in this study. You may contact me, Amy J. Carroll (carroll089@connect.wcsu.edu), or my dissertation advisor, Dr. Catherine O’Callaghan (ocallaghanc@wcsu.edu), with any questions.

Sincerely,
Amy J. Carroll
carroll089@connect.wcsu.edu

I agree that the study described above can be conducted in this school.
Appendix C: Consent Letter to Teacher
Dear Teacher,

I am a student in the Ed.D. program in Instructional Leadership at Western Connecticut State University. For my dissertation research, I am interested in studying urban special educators’ perceptions of preparedness and self-efficacy to teach students with learning disabilities.

I am seeking your participation in my study. Participants will be special education teachers who work with students with learning disabilities at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Data from all participants will be obtained from a demographic survey and the Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale. A sample of six educators who have efficacy scores among the highest in the sample will participate in a 60-minute interview and complete two reflective prompts about their perceptions of skills needed to work with this population of students. Interviews, which will be conducted outside of the school day, will be audio recorded and transcribed. In appreciation of their time, participants in the interviews and reflective prompts will be given a $25 gift card.

This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Western Connecticut State University Institutional Review Board (Protocol #1718-113). Participation in this study is completely voluntary and participants may refuse to answer any question and are free to withdraw at any time.

Privacy will be protected. Participants’ identifying information will be removed from all data files and reported information. Data will be maintained in a secure location to protect confidentiality.

I wish to thank you for considering participation in this study. You may contact me, Amy J. Carroll (carroll089@connect.wcsu.edu), or my dissertation advisor, Dr. Catherine O’Callaghan (ocallaghanw@wcsu.edu), with any questions.

Sincerely,
Amy J. Carroll (carroll089@connect.wcsu.edu)

☐ By checking this box and typing my name below, I agree to participate in the study described above. I acknowledge that my printed name serves as my digital signature.

Name: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________
Appendix D: Demographic Survey
Demographic Survey

1. Please indicate your highest degree:
   - Bachelor’s
   - Master’s
   - Sixth Year or Additional Certification
   - Doctorate

2. How many years have you taught? ______

3. What grade levels have you taught? _______________

4. In what types of school districts have you taught in your career? (Check all that apply.)
   - Urban
   - Suburban
   - Rural

5. In what types of special education settings have you taught? (Check all that apply.)
   - Inclusion
   - Co-Taught
   - Resource
   - Center Based Learning
   - Community Based Training
   - SCOPE
   - Autism
   - Essential Skills
   - Behavior Disorders Learning Center
   - Other ________________________

6. In what year did you complete your teacher certification program? ______

7. In what type of school district did you complete student teaching? (Check all that apply.)
   If you did not student teach, check here. ______
   - Urban
   - Suburban
   - Rural

8. Evaluate the degree to which you felt prepared to teach students with learning disabilities upon completion of your teacher certification program.
   - Extremely prepared
   - Very prepared
   - Moderately prepared
   - Slightly prepared
   - Not at all prepared
9. Gender:
   - Female
   - Male
   - Choose not to respond

10. Race/Ethnicity:
    - Asian
    - Black
    - Hispanic/Latino
    - White
    - Other
    - Two or more races/ethnicities
    - Choose not to respond
Appendix E: Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013)
### Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instruction</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I can adapt the curriculum to help meet the needs of a student with disabilities in my classroom.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I can adjust the curriculum to meet the needs of high-achieving students and low-achieving students simultaneously.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I can use a wide variety of strategies for teaching the curriculum to enhance understanding for all of my students, especially those with disabilities.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I can adjust my lesson plans to meet the needs of all of my students, regardless of their ability level.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I can break down a skill into its component parts to facilitate learning for students with disabilities.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Professionalism

| 6. I can be an effective team member and work collaboratively with other teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators to help my students with disabilities reach their goals. | | | | | | | | | |
| 7. I can model positive behavior for all students with or without disabilities. | | | | | | | | | |
| 8. I can consult with an intervention specialist or other specialist when I need help, without harming my own morale. | | | | | | | | | |
| 9. I can give consistent praise for students with disabilities, regardless of how small or slow the progress is. | | | | | | | | | |
| 10. I can encourage students in my class to be good role models for students with disabilities. | | | | | | | | | |

### Teacher Support

| 11. I can effectively encourage all of my students to accept those with disabilities in my classroom. | | | | | | | | | |
| 12. I can create an environment that is open and welcoming for students with disabilities in my classroom. | | | | | | | | | |
| 13. I can establish meaningful relationships with my students with disabilities. | | | | | | | | | |

### Classroom Management

<p>| 14. I can effectively deal with disruptive behaviors in the classroom, such as tantrums. | | | | | | | | | |
| 15. I can remain in control of a situation that involves a major temper tantrum in my classroom. | | | | | | | | | |
| 16. I can manage a classroom that includes students with disabilities. | | | | | | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Related Duties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17. I can effectively transport students with physical disabilities from</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vehicles to wheelchairs, from wheelchairs to desks, and to the restroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>without being intimidated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. I can administer medication to students with disabilities if I am asked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to and have the proper certification.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. I can assist students with disabilities with daily tasks such as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>restroom use and feeding.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F: Permission to Use and Include a Copy in the Dissertation Appendix of Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013)
Permission to Use and Include a Copy in the Dissertation Appendix of
Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale (Dawson & Scott, 2013)

From: Laron A Scott <scottla2@vcu.edu>
Sent: Tuesday, November 27, 2018 1:17 PM
To: Amy Carroll
Subject: Re: Teaching Students With Disabilities Efficacy Scale

Hi Amy-
Yes, you can include it as an appendix. We were purposeful with not including a likert scale - as you can select a scale that works best for you.
Thanks.

LaRon A. Scott, Ed.D., B.C.S.E.
Assistant Professor of Special Education
Director, COVE & Online Programs
School of Education www.soe.vcu.edu
Virginia Commonwealth University
1015 W. Main Street
Oliver Hall, Room 4072
Richmond, VA 23284-2020
(804) 828-6556 (804) 225-3554 (fax)

On Mon, Nov 26, 2018 at 8:42 PM Amy Carroll <carroll089@wcsu.edu> wrote:
Dear Dr. Scott,

Thanks for your response giving me permission to use the scale for my dissertation research. Would I also have your permission to include the TSDES instrument as an appendix in my dissertation, which will be uploaded to ProQuest? It is quite alright if you do not want it published in my dissertation. In any case, I also wanted to ask you if there is a manual for the scoring.

Thank you very much,

Amy Carroll
Hi Amy-

Feel free to use the scale. It is located in the article.

Thanks.

LaRon A. Scott, Ed.D., B.C.S.E.
Assistant Professor of Special Education
Director, COVE & Online Programs
School of Education www.soe.vcu.edu
Virginia Commonwealth University
1015 W. Main Street
Oliver Hall, Room 4072
Richmond, VA 23284-2020
(804) 828-6556 (804) 225-3554 (fax)

On Mon, Oct 1, 2018 at 9:06 AM, Amy Carroll <carroll089@wcsu.edu> wrote:
Dear Dr. Dawson and Dr. Scott,

I am a fourth-year doctoral student in the Ed.D in Instructional Leadership program at Western Connecticut State University. I also am a Special Education teacher in Waterbury, CT. I have a strong interest in the self-efficacy of special education teachers in urban schools. I read about the Teaching Students With Disabilities Efficacy Scale while searching for an instrument to use in my dissertation. I am interested to know if it would be possible for me to access this instrument for the purpose of my dissertation research. Please let me know if I might be able to access your instrument.

Thank you,
Amy Carroll
Appendix G: Consent Letter to Teacher for Interview and
Open-Ended Reflective Prompts
Dear Teacher,

I am a student in the Ed.D. program in Instructional Leadership at Western Connecticut State University. For my dissertation research, I am interested in studying urban special educators’ perceptions of preparedness and self-efficacy to teach students with learning disabilities.

I am seeking your participation in the next phase of my study. Participants will be special education teachers who work primarily with students who have learning disabilities, who are within their first six years of teaching, and who achieved efficacy scores among the highest in the sample on the previously administered Teaching Students with Disabilities Efficacy Scale. A sample of six educators will participate in a 60-minute interview and complete two reflective prompts about their perceptions of skills needed to work with this population of students. Interviews, which will be conducted outside of the school day, will be audio recorded and transcribed. In appreciation of your participation in the interview and reflective prompts, you will be given a $25 gift card.

This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Western Connecticut State University Institutional Review Board (Protocol #1718-113). Participation in this study is completely voluntary and participants may refuse to answer any question and are free to withdraw at any time.

Privacy will be protected. Participants’ identifying information will be removed from all data files and reported information. Data will be maintained in a secure location to protect confidentiality.

I wish to thank you for considering participation in this study. You may contact me, Amy J. Carroll (carroll089@connect.wcsu.edu), or my dissertation advisor, Dr. Catherine O’Callaghan (ocallaghanc@wcsu.edu), with any questions.

Sincerely,
Amy J. Carroll (carroll089@connect.wcsu.edu)

By checking this box and typing my name below, I agree to participate in the study described above. I acknowledge that my printed name serves as my digital signature.

Name: ____________________________ Date: ____________________________
Appendix H: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol
Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about your background in teaching. (Probe: What were your motivations for becoming a special education teacher? How many years have you been teaching? What grades and in what types of special education settings (inclusion, resource, self-contained) have you taught? How much time passed between the completion of your program and the start of your first teaching position?)

2. Tell me about what led you to this urban school district. (Probe: Had you worked elsewhere? What type of districts?)

3. Describe your day-to-day responsibilities in your current teaching position. (Probe: How many students do you work with and in what setting(s)? Describe your case management responsibilities (number of students on caseload, number of PPT meetings per year, etc.). Are there any other school activities that are your responsibility (committees, student clubs, duties, organizations?)

4. What do you see as the desired outcomes for your students? (Probe: In what ways do you consider a student successful? What does this look like in your classroom? What do you hope your students will be able to accomplish in the time you work with them?)

5. Tell me about your teacher preparation program. (Probe: What college or university did you earn your certificates through? How long did it take you to complete the program, and how many credits was it? What type of school settings did you observe? Did you complete an internship? If so, what was the duration?)

6. Tell me about your student teaching experience. (Probe: Year, length of placement(s), grade level(s), and type of setting. In what ways was your cooperating teacher supportive? How supportive would you say he or she was?)

7. Thinking specifically about case management, such as writing IEPs, attending PPT meetings, and testing students, how well prepared were you by your teacher preparation program for teaching and case management in an urban setting?

8. Upon completion of your teacher preparation program and student teaching experience, what were your expectations of and hopes for your teaching career? (Probe: In what setting did you want to work (urban/suburban, inclusion/resource/self-contained, grade level, etc.))?

9. In what ways did you perceive that you were prepared or unprepared for your first year of teaching? (Probe: What was the setting and grade level of your first year of teaching? In what specific areas did you feel that you were prepared or unprepared (classroom management, instruction, planning, assessment, case management, etc.)? Did you have a mentor or other type of support, and if so, how was this support beneficial?)
10. To what degree did your teacher preparation program prepare you for your first teaching position and subsequent positions? (Probe: Instructional, behavioral, and case management duties and workload? Were there specific program requirements, courses, or activities that were especially helpful in your preparation for teaching?)

11. What experiences did you find most valuable in your teacher preparation program to become an urban special educator?

12. What do you think could have prepared you better for teaching special education in an urban school? (Probe: What changes or additions could be made to your teacher preparation program to prepare future teachers more effectively? What advice would you give to a student in a teacher preparation program who is considering becoming a special education teacher in an urban school?)

13. Tell me about your professional development experiences. (Probe: What did you learn that helped you the most? What specific skills or experiences did you find the most valuable?)

14. To what degree do you consider yourself confident in your ability to teach in your current role?

15. Based on what we have talked about today, what else would you like me to understand about your experiences as they relate to your career preparedness and self-efficacy as a special education teacher in an urban environment?
Appendix I: Open-Ended Reflective Prompts
Open-Ended Reflective Prompts

1. What do you perceive as the greatest challenges of teaching special education in an urban school? (Probe: What aspects of working with students, parents, teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators are particularly challenging? What aspects of your program structure (building, educational program, schedule, etc.) are particularly challenging? Share an example of an especially challenging experience as a teacher.)

2. What do you consider the most rewarding aspects of teaching special education in an urban school? (Probe: Interactions with students, parents, teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators. Share an example of a particularly gratifying experience as a teacher. What are your motivations for continuing to teach special education in an urban school?)
Appendix J: Qualitative Coding and Analysis
### Qualitative Coding and Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Findings Statement 1</th>
<th>While they had varying perceptions of their preparedness to teach when they completed their teacher preparation programs, many special educators with a strong sense of self-efficacy believed they were making a difference in the lives of their students, despite a lack of resources.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Themes</strong></td>
<td>Special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy participated in teacher preparation programs that varied in requirements, support, and perceived value.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subthemes</strong></td>
<td>· Participants had varying perceptions of the value of these requirements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· Teachers received varying levels of support in their student teaching experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· There was no distinct preparation pathway that impacted a strong sense of self-efficacy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Categories</td>
<td>Preservice Journey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>preparation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings
Statement 2

Although they felt challenged by some of the responsibilities of their teaching positions such as managing student behavior, many special education teachers developed a strong sense of self-efficacy over time, due in part to the assistance they received from their colleagues.

| Themes | The majority of special education teachers did not feel exceptional learner ready on day one for student behaviors. | Special education teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy received support from various sources in their teaching career. |
| Subthemes |
| · Beginning special education teachers in all types of classrooms found it challenging to manage severe behavior of students. |
| · Teachers in self-contained classrooms received more behavior training provided by the school district than teachers who worked in resource settings. |
| · Teachers often lacked needed behavioral support from building administrators. |
| · As beginning special education teachers, participants relied heavily on support from special education teacher colleagues, and less on the assistance of assigned mentors. |
| · Participants had diverse experiences and perceptions of support from administrators at school and district levels. |
| · Participants overall did not view district professional development as a source of support. |

| Categories | Teaching Career | Perceptions of Preparedness | Support | Teaching Career |
EdD in Instructional Leadership
Department of Education and Educational Psychology
Dissertation Registration Form

Student: Amy J. Carroll
Date: December 5, 2019

Dissertation Title: Urban Special Educators’ Perceptions of Preparedness and Self-Efficacy to Teach Students with Learning Disabilities

Dissertation Committee Members: See attached Dissertation Approval Page

For Office Use Only.

Catherine O’Callaghan, PhD
Primary Advisor
Signature
Date

Marcia A. B. Delcourt, PhD
Program Coordinator
Signature
Date

Joan Palladino, EdD
Dean, School of Professional Studies
Signature
Date

Christopher Shankle, EdD
Associate Director, Division of Graduate Studies
Signature
Date