The Strengths and Challenges Perceived by Special Education Teachers of Students with Emotional Disturbance: A Mixed Methods Study

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The Strengths and Challenges Perceived by Special Education Teachers of Students with Emotional Disturbance: A Mixed Methods Study

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the

Department of Education and Social Work

West Chester University

West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree of

Doctor of Education

By

Brittany A. Severino

May 2021

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Dedication

I want to dedicate this dissertation to several important family members in my life. First, I would like to dedicate this to my mother, Jenifer, and my grandmother, Anne Marie. These two strong independent women raised me and instilled in me never to underestimate my capabilities at a very young age. I would also like to dedicate this to my father, John, who has shown me through his words and actions the importance of continuing to set goals for myself. Earning my doctorate in education has been the most difficult challenge that I have accomplished, but it will definitely not be my last. My upbringing prepared me with the skills needed to consider starting this doctorate program.

Next, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Austin, who helped me accomplish this doctorate program. I decided to take on this commitment at the start of our marriage which is already a transitional phase in life. He is the one who lives with me daily to witness the moments I felt triumphant and the moments I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He has supported me through every high and low of this journey. He motivated me to know I can do this even when I doubted myself. He has rewarded me in both big ways like a new computer and small ways like ordering my favorite food for dinner or volunteering to do the chores to take a stressor off my plate.

Lastly, I would like to devote this dissertation to my soon-to-be son or daughter. Finding out I was pregnant while writing my dissertation has been the most motivating factor to help me accomplish this goal. I can’t wait to tell you one day about this journey I was able to achieve with your support! You became my biggest “why” for crossing the finish line. I’m not going to force you to get your doctorate like me, but I will always encourage you to work hard towards achieving your own goals, whatever they may be. Dream big little one!
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Dr. Lesley Siegel, thank you for encouraging me to follow this topic! This inquiry started as an idea in your qualitative research methods class that you helped me bring to life and commit to as my dissertation topic. Thank you for your support specific to planning the qualitative components of my study and analyzing the data. Deb Gutherman, WCU Writing Tutor, thank you for reviewing portions of my dissertation to help me think through what I was trying to express when my mind was mush! Your patience, knowledge, and sense of humor made the proofreading process enjoyable.

Last but certainly not least, thank you to my Cohort 3 members! The dissertation process can be an isolating experience, but the bond we have created with each other provided me the inspiration needed to complete this goal. You are more than friends but considered family to me. I want to give a special shout-out to Janice Pietrowicz, Morgan Crozier, Courtney Kofeldt, and Patrick Sasse for being my daily support group! I could not have accomplished this milestone without the various supports provided by West Chester University.
Abstract

High school-aged students who qualify for special education services with the disability of Emotional Disturbance (ED) are at elevated risk of experiencing negative school and life consequences (Balagna et al., 2013; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Maag, 2006). Likewise, special education teachers who instruct this population of students are at greater risk of leaving the occupation within the first couple of years (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Cancio et al., 2018). These two alarming trends create the need for research to provide insight into how retention can be increased and attrition can be reduced for Emotional Support Teachers (ESTs). This study utilized an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design by conducting (1) a questionnaire, (2) semi-structured focus groups, and (3) final clarifying questions with both novice and veteran ESTs. Billingsley’s (1993) framework on the factors that impact attrition and retention and Ryan and Deci’s (2000) motivation theory guide this dissertation study to understand what strengths and challenges the participants perceive to face. This study will provide educational decision-makers and policymakers with implications to reduce the frequent teacher turnover for students with ED.

Keywords: emotional disturbance, emotional support teacher, retention, attrition, novice, veteran
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The Strengths and Challenges Perceived by Special Education Teachers of Students with Emotional Disturbance: A Mixed Methods Study

High schools across the United States are in dire need of qualified special education teachers to support students with emotional disturbance (Bettini et al., 2020). Public high school special education teachers often serve secondary students with Emotional Disturbance (ED) in the Emotional Support (ES) classroom. The special education teachers in this position are commonly referred to as Emotional Support Teachers (ESTs) (PaTTAN, 2019). This study is focused on the retention and attrition of novice and veteran public high school special education teachers of students with ED. Before this topic can be investigated, it is important to understand the main causes of attrition and retention, in particular: the high attrition rate (Bettini et al., 2017), frequent teacher-turnover (Hagaman & Casey, 2018), overall secondary special education teacher shortage (Lesh et al., 2017), and demand for continued research on retention (Billingsley & Bettini et al., 2019).

The attrition rate for special education teachers of students with ED is alarming, with most leaving within three years of employment (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Cancio et al., 2018). Teachers of students with ED are among the highest-ranked need areas across the country and have been for decades (AAEE, 2010, 2015), causing scholars to explore why special education teachers of students with ED continue to exit the field at these rapid rates. Their research found that ESTs resign to either work in different positions within teaching such as the general education classroom (Billingsley, 1993; Billingsley et al., 2004; DeMik, 2008) or leave education altogether to pursue different career choices (Billingsley, 1993; Billingsley et al., 2004; Lesh et al., 2017; Smith, 2018). ESTs reported that they seek different employment opportunities because of the stress associated with their positions, which mainly stems from caseload management (DeMik, 2008; Grant, 2017), role overload (Adera & Bullock, 2010;
Bettini et al., 2017), challenging student behaviors (Brown, 2018; Brunsting et al., 2014), and lack of administrator support (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Brown, 2018; Cancio et al., 2013; Grant, 2017; Prather-Jones, 2011).

The high attrition rate among special education teachers, even greater for ESTs, creates a mass exodus in what researchers have referred to as a “revolving door” (Hagaman & Casey, 2018, p. 277). This frequent turnover makes it difficult for high school students with ED to build a strong relationship with ESTs, impacting their academic, emotional, and social progress (Bettini et al., 2020; Lloyd et al., 2019). Students with ED require skilled teachers to help remediate poor outcomes, such as a greater risk of experiencing school suspensions, retaining grade levels, dropping out, and getting in trouble with law enforcement (Bettini et al., 2020; O’Brien et al., 2019). Students with ED typically have comorbid psychosocial and learning disorders that cause difficulty with self-regulation and social skills. These difficulties cause students with ED to tend to take significant time to build strong relationships with their special education teacher (Mihalas et al., 2009). This bond, however, is vital for students with ED to build trust and be open to receiving support. Thus, the special education teacher turnover creates a disruption in relationship-building and can prolong or prevent students with ED from making connections with their special education teacher (Lind et al., 2017).

The attrition rate also causes a high likelihood for ESTs to be inexperienced, with insufficient skills in classroom management, behavior management, or lack the instructional expertise needed to help students with ED in making progress in their emotional or academic skill deficits (Mihalas et al., 2009). Furthermore, if an EST is unprepared to meet their students’ needs, problematic behaviors can intensify and lead to more restrictive placements for students with ED (Mihalas et al., 2009).
Additionally, ESTs’ high attrition rate is especially alarming for school districts because of the overall teacher shortage. Lesh et al. (2017) state that nearly 98% of U.S. schools lack secondary special education teachers and struggle to find highly qualified applicants. Specifically, the demand for special education teachers for students with ED greatly outweighs the available supply (Henderson et al., 2005), thus increasing the likelihood of students with ED having an inexperienced special education teacher. School districts have to get creative in filling positions, leading to hiring teachers with inadequate experience or no experience at all to fill ESTs’ roles. In fact, the shortage of qualified applicants has become so rampant that an emergency certification, referred to as a permit in Pennsylvania, can be issued if a public school district advertises an available position and receives no fully qualified or properly qualified applicants after ten days (PDE, 2019). The emergency permit allows an individual with a bachelor’s degree but lacking the relevant certification to assume a teaching position for a set period, typically for the school year's duration. Furthermore, their bachelor’s degree does not have to match the teaching position they are filling (PDE, 2019). While this provision fulfills the need, it impacts the education of all children; most significantly, it affects students with ED because ESTs have the highest percentage of being hired with these emergency certificates (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Sutherland et al., 2005).

School districts may also move around their current special education staff or combine classes and caseloads to accommodate for the secondary special education shortage. While this option may seem viable for addressing the needs of students with ED, current literature highlights challenges such as unmanageable workloads and responsibilities that eventually lead to burnout of ESTs (Bettini et al., 2018; Brown, 2018; Smith, 2018). Adding more to an EST’s role may be a temporary fix for a school district but adds to the long-term attrition issue.
Scholars (Bettini et al., 2017; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Prather-Jones, 2011) emphasize the need for educational decision-makers to focus their efforts on retention instead of continual rehiring of unqualified teachers to fill the EST openings due to the frequent turnover. Therefore, this study will explore both novice and veteran secondary ESTs' perceptions to gain insight into what challenges cause novice ESTs to quit and what factors have allowed veteran ESTs to remain in the career. Researchers have found that age and benefits (Albrect et al., 2009; Billingsley, 2004; Feng & Sass, 2018), support from paraprofessionals and related service providers (Albrect et al., 2009; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Dewey et al., 2017), mentoring and professional development (Albrect et al., 2009; Billingsley, 2004; Billingsley, 2009; Smith, 2018), intrinsic motivators (Brown, 2018; Prather-Jones 2011b), and the use of coping skills (Cancio et al., 2018; Prather-Jones, 2011b) are factors that indicate increased retention of ESTs.

The Impact of COVID-19

An additional factor impacting the attrition and retention of secondary ESTs is due to this study's timing. The world is currently enduring the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which has greatly impacted the delivery of special education services. In Pennsylvania, where this study took place, it was mandated for all schools to close down beginning March 13th, 2020. Special education teachers and students had to adjust to virtual learning. To begin the 2020-2021 school year, The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE, 2021) advised public school districts to determine the appropriate mode of instruction depending on each county or city's number of positive cases and spread of the virus. Most school districts remained in the virtual setting and transitioned to hybrid learning, a mix of in-person and online, to adhere to social distancing and safety guidelines (Iivari and Ventä-Olkkonen, 2020). The impact of COVID-19 on special education is an additional factor in the attrition of special education teachers who support students with ED. In their study, Sokal et al. (2020) noted higher levels of burnout in all teachers,
general education and special education alike, due to exhaustion from the pandemic. Stressors arising from their new responsibilities related to developing online instruction and support have impacted teachers’ time management, balancing work and personal life, exacerbated technology issues, and limited support from colleagues and friends (p. 71). A study has yet to be published highlighting the impact of COVID-19 on ESTs, creating a knowledge gap that this study seeks to fill.

**Rationale and Significance**

Teachers of students with ED endure specific challenges related to this population of students, potentially impacting their decision to stay in their current position or leave the field. Students with ED are at the greatest risk for adverse outcomes both in the school setting and life after high school than any other student population (Balagna et al., 2013; Samuels, 2018). Students with ED exhibit significant behavioral, social, and emotional challenges, which makes the experiences of ESTs more challenging than other special education teachers (Bettini et al., 2019). These needs cause students with ED to have difficulty with reading, writing, and math skills despite exhibiting average intelligence (Ennis & Jolivette, 2014; Rice & Yen, 2010; Wiley et al., 2008). These deficits tend to remain stable or worsen over time, causing the most significant challenge for students at the secondary level (Wiley et al., 2008). Students with ED are more likely to fail their academic classes and have to retake credits or retain a grade level (Sutherland & Singh, 2004). Bettini et al. (2020) note how students with ED are at greater risk of being separated from their general education peers and less likely to graduate within a four-year time frame. Almost 40% of students K-12 who receive special education services for emotional disturbance receive more than 60% of their instruction in self-contained special education classrooms (Bettini et al., 2020, p. 209). Additionally, Samuels (2018) identifies that only 3% of
students are typically educated in separate schools, but 13% of students with emotional disturbance are educated in alternative school settings (p. 4).

Students with ED can exhibit various problematic behaviors categorized as internalizing behaviors such as anxiety or depression, externalizing behaviors such as noncompliance or aggression, or a combination of both (Rice & Yen, 2010). These behaviors cause students with ED to be more likely to get in trouble and receive a suspension or school expulsion. Approximately 25% of all long-term school suspensions are students with ED, even though they only represent a small percentage of a school’s population (Samuels, 2018). The diagnosis of emotional disturbance can have a negative stigma associated with these students' behaviors and social-emotional needs (Samuels, 2018). The challenges for students with ED do not stop in high school but are persistent throughout their lives. Since students with ED are not getting the support they need in high school, it sets them up for failure in life. These students encounter poor post-school outcomes as evidenced by the chronic unemployment, revolving cycle of contact with the juridical system, and disconnection from their communities (Lane & Carter, 2016).

There are limited research studies available that explore the voices of special education teachers who work with students with ED at the high school level regarding job satisfaction. Most studies include elementary to high school teachers' views lumped together, even though there are significant differences among different age groups of students with ED (Billingsley et al., 2006). New research aimed at identifying recommendations to reduce attrition and increase retention at the secondary level will not only benefit special education teachers and school administrators but, most importantly, help high school students with ED and their families.

**Rationale for Method Design**

I will use an explanatory sequential mixed methods design to identify different motivators and job-related stressors experienced by high school teachers of students with ED in
There is limited research available on this topic that includes qualitative research designs, with the majority of research in the past 30 years utilizing quantitative research designs (Billingsley, 2004; Hagaman & Casey, 2018). Billingsley (2004) conducted a literature review comparing 20 published studies from 1992 to 2002 that explored job-related factors impacting special education teachers, including ESTs, in transferring positions or leaving the field. Most of the researchers focused on quantitative data analysis using surveys or questionnaires to acquire information. Hagaman and Casey (2018) conducted an updated literature review, in which the results aligned with Billingsley’s (2004) findings, that most research on attrition and retention of special education teachers, including those focused on EST’s used quantitative research designs.

Quantitative research designs are valuable in identifying the different factors that lead to shortages and attrition of ESTs. However, there is an overall lack of research exploring secondary ESTs’ retention factors (Brunsting et al., 2014, p. 681). Research that incorporates qualitative research designs is needed to fully understand the factors that cause special education teachers who work with students with ED to leave or remain in the field. Mixed methods designs allow researchers to use quantitative and qualitative forms of data analysis to gain an understanding of how EST’s conceptualize their work (Lesh et al., 2017, p. 23). Researchers (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Brown, 2018; Prather-Jones, 2011; Smith, 2018) identified several areas of exploration needed to help address this phenomenon, including the voices of novice and veteran ESTs (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Brown, 2018; Prather-Jones, 2011; Smith, 2018), the factors that motivate ESTs to stay (Hagaman & Casey, 2018), and the factors that motivate ESTs to leave (Lesh et al., 2017). The specific research questions of this dissertation study aim to address these gaps in research and recommendations for future research.
Researcher’s Positionality

I am conducting a study on the factors that impact attrition and retention of secondary ESTs. This topic is of interest because I currently serve as a high school EST and completing my fifth year teaching, placing me at the cusp of transitioning from a novice to a veteran teacher. I started teaching as a high school learning support teacher and was later moved to an ES classroom due to need. The previous EST resigned, and my employing school district had difficulty hiring a certified special education teacher to fill the position. I felt overwhelmed and unprepared for this position and soon discovered my passion for supporting students with ED. However, I sometimes think that my passion for helping the students is not enough to prevent me from feeling burnout due to the challenges associated with this particular student population.

I currently also teach as an adjunct college professor in special education, which puts me in an interesting position regarding my perspective. I love preparing pre-service teachers to support students who receive special education services and often share my own experiences from the classroom. However, I can’t help but worry about the alarming statistics regarding novice special education teachers’ attrition and am concerned that my undergrad students may add to the statistics. I want to motivate my undergraduate students to make a difference in the lives of the students they teach but also want them to understand the real challenges that teachers, especially ESTs, face.

My own experience motivated me to listen to my fellow secondary ESTs to determine what factors encourage them to remain in their position and what challenges cause them to consider leaving. This study aims to gain knowledge that can improve my educational practice and provide recommendations for change. The participants in my study will also have the opportunity to reflect individually and with others to determine areas for improvement within their classroom practices.
Problem Statement

This study will further explore the job-related strengths and challenges that public high school special education teachers who work with students with ED identify. Investigating this topic is crucial to determine why this population of educators continues to leave the field and what administrations and policymakers could change to improve retention rates. Notably, Cancio et al. (2018) identified that ESTs exit the field before obtaining tenure status (p. 452), never moving beyond novice status. Previous research has identified that focusing on this target population can help address the factors associated with their attrition and therefore help to resolve the teacher shortage problem (Prather-Jones, 2011, p. 84).

Importantly, veteran teachers have the opportunity to share information on what has allowed them to remain in the field, and scholars can use this information to advise novice ESTs (Lesh et al., 2017). The experiences of novice and veteran ESTs are vital in understanding job satisfaction. This study will address both voices by utilizing a three-phase explanatory sequential mixed methods design. The first phase of the methodology includes a questionnaire, the second phase involves ESTs participating in semi-structured focus groups, and the last phase includes ESTs providing written responses to clarifying questions.

Research Questions

1. How do novice and veteran secondary special education teachers working with students who have emotional disturbance perceive external, employment, and personal factors that are related to their job satisfaction?
   a. What external, employment, and personal factors are perceived to be strengths?
   b. What external, employment, and personal factors are perceived to present challenges?
2. What extrinsic and intrinsic variables related to external, employment, and personal factors do teachers working with students who have emotional disturbance report that contributes to their decision to stay in or leave their current teaching position?

Definition of Terms

The following section will operationally define each of the key vocabulary words used in this dissertation study specific to the topic. These terms are essential in understanding the purpose and significance of the research design.

Attrition- Special education teachers who transfer to a different position or exit the profession (Billingsley, 2004, p. 40)

External Factors- External variables are factors that influence a teacher’s job satisfaction that is outside of their daily work responsibilities. These factors are external to the employing school district and the teacher (Billingsley, 1993, p. 148). These factors include laws, policies, societal views or pressures on education, the connection and safety teachers feel to the community they teach, and teachers' preparation (Billingsley, 1993).

Employment Factors- Factors that directly impact teachers’ daily work responsibilities including administrator support, colleague support, professional development opportunities, planning time, salary and benefits, available resources, and the relationships that teachers form with their students (Billingsley, 1993).

Emotional Disturbance- One of the thirteen disability categories that students can qualify for special education services. Students with emotional disturbance typically have a mental health disorder including anxiety disorders, bipolar, conduct disorders, eating disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorders (OCD), and psychiatric disorders (Balagna et al., 2013).
**Emotional Support**- Students with disabilities receive services and support from a special education teacher in a public school setting. Students can be classified with, but not limited to, emotional disturbance (PaTTAN, 2020).

**Extrinsic**- Extrinsic variables are tangible or intangible motivators that influence a teachers’ job satisfaction. Administrators, school districts, and government policies typically control these variables. These factors motivate teachers by earning specific rewards for their actions (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71).

**Full-Time**- This term refers to the level of special education services a student receives. Full-time refers to a student receiving special education services for 80% or more of the school day (PDE, 2020).

**General Education**- Students are educated with and without disabilities by a general education teacher in the public school setting. (PaTTAN, 2018).

**Intrinsic**- Intrinsic variables are factors that are considered natural motivators for teachers. These variables highly motivate teachers and are intuitive. These variables can be unique for each teacher and include a teacher's desire or passion for education (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 70).

**Itinerant**- This term refers to the level of special education services a student receives. Itinerant refers to a student receiving special education services for 20% or less of the school day (PDE, 2020).

**Novice**- Special education teachers with five or fewer years of experience (Hagaman & Casey, 2018)

**Personal Factors**- Personal factors are unique and individual to each teacher, including a teachers’ age, race, ethnicity, gender, employment experience, family structure, beliefs, and morals (Billingsley, 1993, p. 161).
Retention- Special education teachers who stay or remain in the same position and at the same school as the previous school year (Billingsley, 2004, p. 40)

Special Education- The services, supports, and specially designed instruction a student receives with one or more of the qualifying IDEA disability categories (PaTTAN, 2018).

Supplemental- This term refers to the level of special education services a student receives. Supplemental refers to a student receiving special education services for more than 20% but less than 80% of the school day (PDE, 2020).

Veteran- A special education teacher with more than six or more years of experience (Snyder, 2017)

Summary

The shortage of public high school special education teachers who work with students with ED is not a new issue in the USA, but an issue that has not been resolved or significantly investigated in current research (Bettini et al., 2020; Brown, 2018; Smith, 2018). This study will shed light on this issue by filling in the current research gaps by highlighting the voices of secondary novice and veteran ESTs. It is essential to understand what research has accomplished on this topic and why it needs further investigation; therefore, the following section will outline the literature, theories, and policies that have impacted ESTs’ attrition and retention.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

This section of my dissertation study will summarize the scholarly findings related to the retention and attrition of special education teachers who support students with Emotional Disturbance (ED) in the public school setting. Blake and Monahan (2007) identify how the average “classroom life” of a special education teacher is eight years (p. 60), but this span is even less for special education teachers who support students with ED. The duration of most ESTs is short -- just three years or less according to Billingsley and Bettini (2019)-- due to various reasons, including federal and local policies (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007), job responsibilities (Bettini et al., 2016), and personal characteristics (Gilmour, 2019). To explain each of these reasons in-depth, the following section will review the current literature and policies in Pennsylvania regarding special education services. This review will set the stage for explaining how this dissertation study will expand the recent research findings on factors that impact ESTs attrition and retention.

Related Research on Attrition

In the past thirty years, various researchers have aimed to evaluate the reasons why special education teachers continue to leave the field. The major themes include role overload, the complexity and ambiguity of paperwork, and lack of administrator support (Billingsley et al., 2006; Brunsting, 2014; Cancio et al., 2018; Grant, 2017; Hagaman & Casey, 2018; Lesh et al., 2017). However, only a handful of studies have explored the perceptions of special education teachers who work with students with ED. Billingsley and Bettini (2019) conducted a literature review investigating the studies published between 2002 and 2017; the researchers found only four out of 25 studies focused on the retention and attrition of teachers who serve students with ED (Albrect et al., 2009; Cancio et al., 2013; Prather-Jones, 2011a, 2011b). ESTs experience the
same challenges as special education teachers in general but also differences based on the needs of students with ED.

**Paperwork**

When evaluating ESTs retention, studies identify paperwork as a significant concern for leaving (Bettini et al., 2019). Based on IDEA 2004 guidelines, special education teachers are required to create an annual Individualized Education Program (IEP), progress reports based on students’ annual IEP goals, and also to be involved in the development of the Evaluation Report (ER) or Reevaluation Report (RR) to determine eligibility for special education services. Special education teachers, including ESTs, report spending more than half of their time completing this necessary paperwork (Grant, 2017, p. 4), despite the fact that the most fulfilling part of their jobs is working directly with students (DeMik, 2008). The responsibilities for paperwork often lead to special education teachers spending less time supporting their students or requiring them to work hours outside of their workday; issues associated with this time distribution often cause significant job dissatisfaction (Bettini et al., 2017).

Students with ED experience difficulty with various academic skills, self-regulation and coping skills, and executive functioning skills that each require special education teachers to report progress on (Gresham, 2015). The plethora of skill deficits that students with ED can exhibit require additional time for ESTs to collect and analyze data. Moreover, students with ED are more likely to have Behavior Intervention Plans (BIP), adding yet another piece of paperwork to complete and monitor (Collins & Zirkel, 2012). Additionally, these teachers need to document all communication with ED students’ support from outside service providers, such as therapists or behavioral specialists (Bettini et al., 2019). These specialized job responsibilities -- which other teachers, even special education teachers, may not have -- can make paperwork requirements incredibly overwhelming for teachers of students with ED (Bettini et al., 2018).
Planning Time

Special education teachers of students with ED have various job requirements based on the special education process and legal mandates, including planning and implementing instruction, preparing required paperwork, facilitating IEP meetings, collaborating with team members, and non-teaching responsibilities that all teachers are required to complete (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). One of the most significant stressors reported in the literature is ESTs not having enough planning time during the school day to accomplish these tasks (Bettini et al., 2019; Billingsley & Bettini et al., 2020; Bettini, 2019). Bettini et al. (2019) found that all special education teachers, including ESTs, reported spending almost 10 hours outside of their contractual hours per week to accomplish their job requirements. Taking work home can lead to increased stress and less time to engage in coping skills, which are both linked to attrition (Nelson et al., 2001).

Diverse Student Needs

Special education teachers face an array of challenges when trying to support students with ED due to students varying in academic and social needs, age ranges, and grade levels. Students with ED can have various mental-health-related needs due to Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and other comorbid psychiatric disorders (Mihalas et al., 2009). Accommodating all of these factors creates an overwhelming work environment for educators. Students’ with ED also exhibit needs in self-determination skills, which include choice making, decision making, problem-solving, goal setting and attainment, self-advocacy and leadership skills, self-management and self-regulation, and self-awareness and self-knowledge (Carter et al., 2008; Carter et al., 2015; Lane et al., 2004). These seven skills can manifest differently for students in terms of what they need a special education teacher’s support. ESTs conduct interventions for self-determination skills in special education classrooms (Carter et al., 2015).
The various skill deficits that students with ED have cause special education teachers to have to plan for several different lessons within one. This task can be overwhelming for special education teachers if they have limited experience teaching the skills and due to the lack of planning time (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

Moreover, although these skills are the ones with which these students most struggle, they are not the focus of teacher preparation programs based on NCLB (2001) and ESSA (2015) guidelines, causing many special education teachers who work with students with ED to feel unprepared (Bettini et al., 2020; O’Brien, 2019; Brown et al., 2018). This feeling of unpreparedness stems from the expectation-reality mismatch, where teachers’ pre-service expectations do not match the reality of teaching experiences (Stan, 2019, p.67). Special education teachers must teach academic subjects, executive functioning skills, and emotional/behavioral skills, sometimes in the same class period (Bettini et al., 2019). Between the variety of reasons for students’ qualifying as ED and the assortment of lessons that the EST needs to include, EST has too many factors and topics to cover in a single class, leaving the EST with an impossible job.

In addition to students’ varied needs, other factors can contribute to classroom diversity, including the age range and grade level of students. Most high school students anticipate graduating at eighteen years old; however, students in most states can remain in public school until twenty-one years old (NCES, 2017). Students with ED are more likely to be retained, therefore causing them to be older than their peers (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Due to scheduling constraints, students with ED are typically lumped together in one class period to receive support. This arrangement creates a classroom with students ranging from 9th to 12th grade and within those grade levels, students ranging from fourteen to twenty-one years old. For example, Adera and Bullock (2010) used a mixed-methods design and found that the diverse
needs in ED classrooms were a key stressor for almost 68% of the participants (p.9). Participants described this challenge as “having students with a variety of cognitive, social, and emotional needs within the same classroom makes it impossible to deliver quality instruction” (p. 10).

**Administrator Support**

Special education teachers of students with ED identify a lack of administrator support as a common challenge (Conley & You, 2017; Cancio et al., 2013). Students with ED interact with administrators more frequently than their general education and special education peers since they are at-risk for getting in trouble (Balagna et al., 2013; Maag, 2006). Special education teachers and administrators need to have open communication since special education teachers are responsible for managing students’ paperwork and documenting disciplinary incidents (Cancio et al., 2013). Prather-Jones (2011) conducted semi-structured interviews to identify that administrator support was a common theme that special education teachers who work with students with ED needed in terms of feeling appreciated and respected, being a part of discipline-related decisions for students on their caseloads, and being knowledgeable about special education (p. 83). These findings illustrate how it is essential for administrators and teachers of students with ED to have a close and supportive relationship.

**Colleague Support**

Special education teachers of students with ED identify a lack of support from coworkers as a significant concern (Bettini et al., 2017). IDEA (2004) states that all students, including students with ED, should be educated in the least restrictive environment (§300.114). This term means that students should be in the general education classroom with their grade-level peers to the greatest extent possible. For students to be successful in the general education environment, many school districts utilize co-teaching. Co-teaching allows general education and special education teachers to collaborate with and support all students. However, Grant’s research
(2017) findings indicated special education teachers, including ESTs, report poor co-teaching relationships, ineffective co-teaching practices, and insufficient co-planning time as significant difficulties (p. 10).

Furthermore, Grant (2017) identifies how administrators and colleagues' lack of support can cause special education teachers of students with ED to feel isolated (p. 6). Isolation can increase stress and burnout in ESTs, which is a significant reason why many special education teachers leave (Brown, 2018; Stan, 2019). One factor that helps explain isolation is the limited number of special education teachers per school building that support students with ED. Students with ED make up a small portion of a school's overall special education population (Samuels, 2018, p. 14). High schools may only have one to three teachers that support this population of students depending on the size and resources available. The limited number of teachers in this specific position can cause special education teachers to feel alone.

**Related Research on Retention**

Retaining certified special education teachers to support students with ED is essential versus continually hiring new teachers (Prather-Jones, 2011, 2011b). Factors that help improve retention have been a focus in recent literature to help combat the overwhelming reasons for attrition. Specifically, researchers have found that age and benefits (Albrect et al., 2009; Billingsley, 2004; Feng & Sass, 2018), support from paraprofessionals and related service providers (Albrect et al., 2009; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Dewey et al., 2017), mentoring and professional development (Albrect et al., 2009; Billingsley, 2004; Billingsley, 2009; Smith, 2018), intrinsic motivators (Brown, 2018; Prather-Jones 2011b), and the use of coping skills (Cancio et al., 2018; Prather-Jones, 2011b) are linked to increased retention for teachers of students with ED.
**Age and Benefits**

Special education teachers of students with ED with less than five years of experience are more prone to leave teaching versus special education teachers with ten or more years of experience to have a higher rate of remaining in their current position (Albrecht et al., 2009, p. 1013). Veteran ESTs have more experience, making them better equipped to handle challenges associated with working with students with ED. However, the biggest motivator for older special education teachers of students with ED is retirement and benefits. Special education teachers who are the primary breadwinner or identify as single parents are more likely to stay in their positions than those who are not (Billingsley, 2004). Additional monetary perks can also help increase retention rates. Feng and Sass (2017) examined how loan forgiveness and salary bonuses for novice secondary teachers in high-need subjects, including ESTs, significantly reduced attrition rates.

**Paraprofessionals and Related Service Providers**

Billingsley and Bettini (2019) found that support from paraprofessionals and related service providers is associated with an intent to stay for ESTs. Support from paraprofessionals can include working under special education teachers' supervision to help support students one-on-one or in a small group setting (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). This type of support benefits ESTs by having another person involved in classroom and behavior management. In their study, Dewey et al. (2017) identified how paraprofessionals play an essential role in helping students with ED make meaningful progress and help support special education teachers manage increasing caseload sizes. The frequency of support that ESTs receive from paraprofessionals also plays an important factor. Albrecht et al. (2009) surveyed almost 800 special education teachers of students with ED and found they were more likely to stay if they had daily access to paraprofessionals versus support available by request or on an inconsistent basis. Similarly,
support from related service providers such as speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, behavioral specialists, and physical therapists is connected to increased retention rates among ESTs. Albrect et al. (2009) found that special education teachers of students with ED who frequently collaborated with related service providers indicated an intent to stay.

**Mentoring and Professional Development**

Other factors linked to intent to stay are access to a mentor and regular professional development. Young special education teachers of students with ED are more likely to remain in their position if a mentor is available to support them at the start of their career (Billingsley, 2004). However, it can be difficult for special education teachers to have available mentors in the same school building or who teach students with the exact needs, such as students with ED (Billingsley et al., 2009) because many schools have only one teacher in the EST’s role. Alongside mentorship, opportunities for professional development increase retention rates for special education teachers. Albrect et al. (2009) found that ESTs identified as stayers rated professional development opportunities as a supportive factor to remain in their current position. Smith (2018) found similar results as new special education teachers of students with ED having mentors with experience with this population of students had the highest mean score for reported stayers.

**Intrinsic Motivators**

Another common factor linked to increasing retention for special education teachers of students with ED includes intrinsic motivators that help them remain in the current position. Prather-Jones (2011b) found that special education teachers of students with ED feel they have a calling or purpose to work with this high-needs population. Brown (2018) found special education teachers’ own experience, such as having a family member or personally struggling with a mental health disorder or trauma, motivated them to work with students with ED. The
researcher also found that faith and religion were factors to increase retention as they helped ESTs find patience and strength when dealing with job stressors (Brown, 2018, p. 35).

**Coping Skills**

Special education teachers of students with ED report higher stress levels associated with their job responsibilities that lead to burnout and ultimately leave the profession (Brown, 2018). Using coping skills to manage stress can help special education teachers’ overall well-being, health, and enhance their enjoyment of work (Cancio et al., 2018). Previous research has identified coping skills such as eating, smoking, and alcohol/drug use to help manage job-related stressors for special education teachers of students with ED (Pullis, 1992). Cancio et al. (2018) found similar results, however, the coping strategies with the highest rankings included seeking support from family and friends and listening to music. Coping skills can also help change a teacher’s mindset to help them appropriately deal with job-related stressors. Prather-Jones (2011b) found that special education teachers of students with ED who reported not taking student behavior personally, accepting limitations as a teacher, and having flexibility for students’ unpredictable behavior helped increase motivation to remain in the career.

**Theoretical Framework**

This dissertation’s research questions are designed based on Billingsley’s (1993) framework regarding special education teacher’s attrition and retention. Dr. Bonnie Billingsley earned her doctorate in education at Virginia Tech and has been a special education professor with over forty years of teaching, administration, and research experience. Billingsley's list of accomplishments includes over seventy published articles or chapters focused on preparing, supporting, and retaining special education teachers (SAGE, 2020). It is safe to say that Billingsley’s 1993 framework is in the reference section of any study exploring the retention and
attrition of special education teachers (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Thus, I have decided to use this framework to guide this dissertation study.

Billingsley’s (1993) framework includes three categories of factors that influence special education teachers’ career decisions and they are external, employment, and personal factors (p. 147). A combination of these factors influences special education teachers to either stay, transfer, or exit the field (Billingsley, p. 147). The first part of my methodology includes a questionnaire that I developed based on the three categories of Billingsley’s original survey. Data from the questionnaire were used to answer the first two research questions of this study. Participants’ responses to these items were analyzed to determine the strengths and challenges experienced by participants relevant to each category. Ryan and Deci’s (2000) theory on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is used in conjunction with Billingsley’s (1993) framework to answer the last research question of this study. Figure 2.1 outlines the theoretical framework that guides the research questions and methodology of this study. The following subsections outline each category's criteria, which is essential for understanding how the items are used to satisfy the research questions.

**Figure 2.1**

*Theoretical framework*
**External Factors**

The first category in Billingsley's (1993) framework identifies external factors to teachers and their employing school districts that impact career decisions. The economy is one example of an external factor that can indirectly cause a teacher to stay in or leave their current employment. When the economy is not doing well, such as a recession or a national pandemic, it can influence teachers to remain in their current positions (Billingsley, 1993, p. 148). Brown (2018) interviewed novice and veteran special education teachers who work with students with ED to find that job security played the most significant factor in teachers staying (p. 68). The location of a school district can also indirectly impact a teacher’s decision to stay or leave. If a teacher does not feel safe or connected to the community culture, they may decide to find a school district that best matches their own identity. Grant (2017) found that special education teachers were likely to leave their current employment due to negative perceptions of special education in the community and school-wide (p. 10). Additionally, Albrecht et al. (2009) identified that most urban and disadvantaged school districts reported more significant shortages of special education teachers (p. 1007).

External factors also include institutions at the local and state level. A teachers’ undergraduate experience can profoundly impact their career decision. Grant (2017) found that inadequate preparation or training caused first-year special education teachers to be discouraged from remaining in the field (p. 12). Each state has specific policies and regulations regarding special education teachers’ responsibilities and the requirements for obtaining and maintaining certification. These conditions include passing certification assessments, professional development, continuing education, and yearly evaluations. These responsibilities also include caseload numbers and required paperwork, which are primary stressors for special education teachers (Brown, 2018; Brunsting, 2014; Cancio et al., 2018; Grant, 2017; Hagaman & Casey, 2018).
In Pennsylvania, an EST can have as many as 50 itinerant students or 20 supplemental students on their caseload (PDE, 2020). Itinerant refers to students who spend 80% or more of their school day in the general education setting. Supplemental indicates students who spend more than 20% but less than 80% of their school day in the general education setting (PaTTAN, 2020). This regulation set out by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) is considered an external factor that many special education teachers of students with ED report as a primary stressor (Bettini et al., 2018; Grant, 2017).

**Employment Factors**

A special education teacher’s professional qualifications can impact their decision to remain in their current position. The path ESTs took to obtain their teaching certification, and the degree or certifications held can influence an EST’s retention. Billingsley et al. (2006) found that ESTs are less likely to be certified through traditional routes and more likely to obtain their training through alternative certification routes (p. 257). The type and length of training are important for ESTs because they are required to address the many challenging behaviors that students with ED exhibit (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Brown, 2018). These challenges can include physical and verbal acts of aggression from students which can reduce motivation to work with this population of students (Brown, 2018, p. 72).

The overall work environment can either be conducive to or destructive to a teacher’s psychological needs (Stan, 2019). Support from administrators, colleagues, and parents can impact the career decision of special education teachers. Many special education teachers of students with ED note an overall lack of support and feelings of isolation and burnout (Stan, 2019). Another example of employment factors includes a teacher’s ability to have autonomy in completing their job responsibilities. Special education teachers want to be recognized for their expertise and included in decision making regarding special education practices (Billingsley,
25

1993, p. 155). Lastly, work rewards, including extrinsic rewards like planning time, paid time off, salary, and benefits, can also impact an EST’s career decision. Billingsley (2004) identifies that an increase in special education teachers’ wages could increase the retention of all special education teachers (p. 45).

**Personal Factors**

ESTs may decide to stay or leave the field of education due to personal factors. This category can include a teacher’s intrinsic motivation or commitment to the job. DeMik (2008) describes how a special education teacher’s passion for helping struggling students can motivate them to remain in the field. However, this same passion can discourage teachers, as DeMik (2008) discovered, “they cared so much about their students that the problems involved in special education became personal battles. This passion fueled their frustration to make changes. Faced with walls they could not climb, they chose to find another path” (p. 31). Intrinsic rewards also involve how a teacher perceives their student’s success. ESTs may experience less of these kinds of rewards since students with disabilities can exhibit slower progress (Billingsley, 1993, p. 158).

Personal factors also include demographic information such as age, gender, and race that impact retention and attrition rates. Billingsley et al. (2006) reviewed the demographic data of special education teachers to find that most teachers who work with students with ED identified as Caucasian, female, and had limited work experience (p. 255). This is concerning since the majority of students with ED identify as African American and male (NCES, 2020). This discrepancy creates a concern for if interventions and supports available are culturally responsive to a students’ needs.

An EST’s experience and education can impact their ability to remain in their position. Teachers of students with ED tend to be significantly younger, have fewer years of teaching
experience, and less likely to be fully certified (Billingsley et al., 2006; State et al., 2019; Sutherland et al., 2010). Most special education teachers in this category have reported being emergency certified for special education, holding a different certification in education, or not being certified (Billingsley et al., 2006; Sutherland et al., 2010). State et al. (2019) identify that this trend has continued with special education teachers of students with ED being twice as likely to be emergency certified compared to special education teachers who work with different populations of students (p. 108).

Family structure can also influence career decisions for teachers. For example, ESTs can enjoy having the same yearly schedule as their children who are school age. Conversely, some teachers leave education to care for younger children or elders at home. Billingsley (2004) found that one-third of special education teachers, including ESTs, leave due to personal/family reasons (p. 44). Albrect et al., (2009) found that ESTs who are the primary breadwinners or who are single parents are more prone to remaining in their position due to financial need.

Motivation

The last research question of this study aims to address what type of motivation impacts both novice and veteran ESTs' career plans. Ryan and Deci (2000) categorize motivation into two specific groups identified as extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is when a person is motivated to complete a task or activity because they will earn some reward or benefit. In contrast, intrinsic motivation is the desire to complete a task or activity solely for personal enjoyment or satisfaction (p. 55). An individual is motivated, extrinsically, or intrinsically, to complete tasks (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It is essential to determine which type of motivation plays the most significant impact on ESTs’ retention and attrition (Brown, 2018; Smith, 2018; Stan, 2019).
The current literature regarding ESTs’ retention and attrition involves looking at intrinsic and extrinsic motivators' impact. Brown (2018) interviewed novice and veteran teachers of students with ED and identified that personal factors, specifically intrinsic motivators, had the most significant impact on teachers remaining in the field (p. 16). Lesh et al. (2017) describe these intrinsic motivators as teachers feeling committed based on their own experience with a disability, a passion for standing up for the underdog, or view their job as a calling (p. 16). Another example included ESTs’ personal faith and religious backgrounds that enabled them to find the strength within themselves to overcome job stressors (Brown, 2018, p. 35). On the contrary, Smith (2018) found that identified leavers expressed that changes in the day-to-day responsibilities of their job would increase their likelihood of staying, and these changes would be considered extrinsic motivators (p. 150). Additionally, Stan (2019) found that most special education teachers, including ESTs, feel the work rewards or extrinsic motivators for their initiatives are insufficient and therefore lead to burnout (Stan, 2019, p. 75).

Conclusion

Billingsley’s (1993) framework on teacher attrition and retention describes the wide variety of variables that can impact an EST’s career decision. These variables are the questionnaire’s content in this dissertation study that will address the first two research questions. The second phase of this study involves participants engaging in a semi-structured focus group. The focus group's guided questions aim to answer the third research question of this dissertation study, looking at retention and attrition motivation. Ryan and Deci (2001) categorize these variables as intrinsic or extrinsic motivators. Billingsley’s (1993) external and employment factors are associated with extrinsic motivators, while personal factors are considered intrinsic motivators. This dissertation study aims to determine what factors play the most significant
influence on high-school special education teachers who work primarily with students with ED regarding their career decision.

**Gaps in the Literature**

The current literature available is insufficient in identifying and addressing why secondary special education teachers who work with students with ED decide to remain or leave the field of education. This uncertainty is partly due to the overall limited research on this topic conducted in the last decade (Bettini et al., 2017; Brown, 2018; Smith, 2018). While the retention and attrition of ESTs was a hot topic in educational research in the early 2000s, the limited existing research makes it difficult to determine if the challenges ESTs perceived to face almost 20 years ago continue to exist today. The current literature does not address the challenges specific to high school ESTs or the differences among novice versus veteran ESTs.

**High School-Aged Students**

The current research fails to address the voices of high school special education teachers who work with students with ED. The research on this topic has included the views of elementary to high school teachers lumped together. This problem is alarming since most students do not get identified with emotional disturbance until high school as their issues become more pronounced (Samuels, 2018, p. 15). Additionally, high school students exhibit challenging behaviors that can be more difficult for teachers to handle than younger students, including both elementary and middle school students (Bettini et al., 2017). These behaviors can include both internalizing and externalizing responses (Brown, 2018; Gettys, 2020). Externalizing behaviors can include classroom disruptions and aggression which can be dangerous for secondary ESTs to manage since students are physically larger and stronger than younger students (Brown, 2018). Behaviors can also be sexualized in the secondary setting since students with ES are continuing
to go through puberty which can place secondary ESTs in inappropriate and uncomfortable situations (Bettini et al., 2017).

Internalizing behaviors can also be more complex for secondary ESTs to support since the sources of anxiety can stem from additional pressures that younger students do not have to face. High school students must balance the pressures of passing classes, maintaining appropriate relationships, and displaying appropriate behaviors in the school and community setting. These demands are difficult for high school students with ED to manage as they have difficulty regulating their emotions, problem-solving, and tend to have more trouble with academics (Bettini et al., 2017; Bosco, 2018). Therefore, students with ED may react to stressors through physical aggression, negative communication, and overall lack of respect for authority (Brown, 2017; Smith, 2018). High school students with ED are at an elevated risk of experiencing negative consequences such as disciplinary referrals, dropping out of school, and criminal offenses (Bettini et al., 2017; Freeman et al., 2019).

**Novice vs. Veteran**

The frequent special education turnover does not allow novice special education teachers the opportunity to become experienced teachers. It also has drastic implications for students with ED since they cannot make positive relationships with teachers due to the high teacher turnover (Hagaman & Casey, 2017; Lesh et al., 2017). The current literature on this topic must explore why novice ESTs leave the field and what changes can be implemented to improve retention (Hagaman & Casey, 2017). To fully understand the strengths and challenges that special education teachers perceive to face, it is vital to hear from both novice and veteran teachers. Novice teachers can speak to the challenges they face that discourage them from being teachers of students with ED. Veteran teachers have the experience to share what has allowed them to remain in the field and advise novice teachers (Lesh et al., 2017). Furthermore, most veteran
special education teachers cite retirement as the main reason they do not leave (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). This response can cause researchers to question if veteran teachers remain in education for the right reasons.

America is currently facing the coronavirus, commonly known as the COVID-19 national pandemic, which has caused many school districts to embrace fully remote and hybrid learning options (Iivari and Ventä-Olkkonen, 2020). This new set of challenges causes special education teachers, including ESTs, to face additional stressors related to their job responsibilities. Lesh (2020) suggests that veteran teachers check in with novice teachers to ensure they do not feel isolated and alone while teaching. Likewise, novice teachers should check in with veteran teachers to provide support with technology (p. 8). The current environment of education creates a need to hear from both novice and veteran special education teachers more than ever.

**Special Education in Pennsylvania**

This study focuses on special education teachers of students with ED who attend public high schools in Pennsylvania. Special education services in Pennsylvania are delivered by special education teachers who work with students with specific disability needs (PaTTAN, 2018). While other states have certifications and degrees for specific disabilities, Pennsylvania only has a general special education certification that spans all thirteen disability categories, including teachers who work with students with ED (PaTTAN, 2018).

**Emotional Disturbance**

Emotional disturbance is one of the 13 disability categories for which a student can receive special education programming. This study focuses on secondary students with ED in the public educational setting. The legal definition for classifying students as having ED in the educational setting is defined as “exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child’s educational
performance”: “An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors,” “An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers,” “Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances,” “A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression,” “A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems,” “Emotional disturbance includes schizophrenia. The term does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance.” (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004, § 300.8).

Emotional disturbance is used as an umbrella term for students who struggle with different mental health disorders that can debilitate their everyday functioning (Balagna et al., 2013). These disorders range from anxiety disorders, bipolar, conduct disorders, eating disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorders (OCD), and psychiatric disorders. Their disability impacts their academic success and their ability to obtain and maintain appropriate relationships with peers and adults. These students are within the most under-identified and underserved population of students (Barnett, 2012, p. 47).

**Emotional Support**

The chapter 14 § 14.131 Pennsylvania code identifies emotional support as special education services in the areas of social or emotional skills development or functional behavior (PaTTAN, 2019). These identified areas are primary concerns for students with ED (Bettini et al., 2020). Pennsylvania requires specific quality indicators for what components emotional support services have that special education teachers must deliver, including academic instruction and support, social-emotional instruction and support, behavior management, collaboration and communication among IEP team members, evaluation and assessments, post-secondary development, and professional development (PaTTAN, 2020). The classroom in
which students with ED, amongst other disability categories, receive these services in the public school setting is generally identified as the emotional support classroom. The special education teacher who teaches and supports these skills is referred to as the emotional support teacher. For purposes of this paper, the term emotional support classroom will apply to the location students with ED receive special education services, and the emotional support teacher (EST) will apply to the special education teacher who provides these services and supports.

**Special Education Training and Certification**

This study focuses on special education teachers of students with ED in Pennsylvania public schools. Each state has its own requirements for certification in special education. In Pennsylvania from 2009 to 2021, enrollment in a special education certification program could certify pre-service teachers in special education for grades PreK-8 or special education for grades 7-12. This option allowed pre-service teachers to work with different grade level spans of students. Special education teachers with either certification could support students with any of the qualifying 13 disability categories and needs.

This requirement forced colleges and universities to develop a curriculum that enables students to be knowledgeable on the critical job responsibilities that they will need to complete in any setting or with any population of students (Oliver & Reschly, 2010). Pennsylvania does not require specialization to work with specific groups of students, such as those who receive emotional support, learning support, autistic support, or life skills support. This broad educational experience can cause special education teachers of students with ED to feel unprepared for their current positions, which can motivate certain special education teachers for continued education to support them with this specific population of students (Billingsley et al. 2006). For other special education teachers, the overwhelming lack of preparation is the main factor in causing them to quit their current positions (Bettini et al., 2020).
Additionally, special education teachers in Pennsylvania were also required to hold general education certification to be highly qualified. Highly qualified status as outlined in the federal government's requirements under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) mandates teachers hold a bachelor’s degree, obtain state certification, and demonstrate competency in each core academic subject they teach (PSEA, 2016). This required pre-service special education teachers to be certified in both special education and general education content areas. Ultimately, this condition required college students interested in special education to complete more coursework to be considered highly qualified but only make the same amount as their general education counterparts (Blake & Monahan, 2007). State legislators have attempted to rectify the shortage of highly qualified special education teachers by changing certification requirements (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

In Pennsylvania, any pre-service teacher expected to graduate after January 2022 no longer needs certification in a content area, and the grade-level span has broadened based on Senate Bill 1216 (Act 136, 2020). Colleges and universities can now offer PreK to 12th-grade certification for interested applicants. This change is significant since it reduces the barriers that pre-service teachers had to endure for certification, making the process easier. It also provides more qualified candidates since the certification now allows special education teachers to support students in all grade levels (Bettini & Billingsley, 2019). This change provides flexibility for school districts to fill growing needs. However, this change does not address the lack of preparation that many novice special education teachers have identified, especially those working with specific populations of students such as those with ED. Future research will need to explore if this policy change eventually reduces the shortage of secondary special education teachers.
Furthermore, secondary special education teachers in Pennsylvania can obtain their certification through alternative routes or emergency permits due to the high need. An interested candidate requires a bachelor’s degree in any subject and then can obtain their certification in teaching through an alternative preparation program or by pursuing their master’s in education and certification (PDE, 2019). Based on a school district’s need, interested candidates can also receive an emergency permit which temporarily allows them to be a secondary special education teacher even without certification (PDE, 2019). The use of emergency permits due to the lack of secondary ESTs further exacerbates the concerns regarding preparedness for their job responsibilities. Teachers obtaining emergency certifications may have not have limited or no experience in special education, further impacting the progress of students with ED (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

**Summary**

The shortage of secondary special education teachers who work with students with ED is not a new issue in America, but an issue that has not been resolved or rigorously investigated in current research (Bettini et al., 2017; Brown, 2018; Smith, 2018). Mitchell et al. (2019) identify that advancements in special education for students with ED have occurred in the past 40 years due to the IDEA (2004), but have not been enough to significantly increase the retention of ESTs and improve the learning outcomes for students with ED (p. 81). The purpose of this dissertation study is to add the existing literature and specifically address the gaps regarding high school novice and veteran special education teachers of students with ED in the public school setting. The next section in this dissertation study, methodology, will discuss the research design used and data analysis procedures conducted to evaluate this topic.
Chapter 3: Methods

Special education teachers are exiting the field at a rate that school districts cannot replenish (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). In particular, teachers of students with emotional disturbance (ED) are most at risk of leaving the profession before acquiring veteran teacher status, defined as at least six years of teaching experience (Bettini et al., 2019). The current research identifies several areas of exploration that are needed to help address this phenomenon; they include the need to explore the voices of novice and veteran teachers (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Brown, 2018; Prather-Jones, 2011; Smith, 2018), to better understand the factors that motivate teachers to stay (Hagaman & Casey, 2018) as well as those that motivate teachers to leave the profession (Lesh et al., 2018). Future research can only shed light on these inquiries by using explanatory mixed-method designs since “a gap exists because past research has not adequately explained the contexts behind the quantitative relationship/differences/trends. There is a need to explain such results in more detail, especially in terms of detailed voices and participant perspectives” (Creswell & Clark, 2018, p. 151).

I utilized an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design by first administering a Likert-scale questionnaire based on Billingsley’s (1993) framework on teachers’ attrition and retention. I used this questionnaire to reveal what factors participants viewed as strengths and challenges. Secondly, I conducted semi-constructed focus groups to allow the participants an opportunity to expand on questionnaire responses. Lastly, participants responded to four final clarifying questions regarding their participation and responses in this dissertation study through journaling.

Research Questions

I created three research questions to guide this study based on Billingsley’s (1993) framework and Ryan and Deci’s (2000) intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Each research
question will first be addressed through the questionnaire (quantitative) and then expanded upon in the focus group and final clarifying questions (qualitative).

1. How do novice and veteran secondary special education teachers working with students who have emotional disturbance perceive external, employment, and personal factors that are related to their job satisfaction?
   a. What external, employment, and personal factors are perceived to be strengths?
   b. What external, employment, and personal factors are perceived to present challenges?

2. What extrinsic and intrinsic variables related to external, employment, and personal factors do teachers working with students who have emotional disturbance report that contributes to their decision to stay in or leave their current teaching position?

Research Variables

Billingsley’s (1993) conceptual framework on teachers’ attrition and retention, and Ryan and Deci’s (2000) intrinsic and extrinsic motivational theory are the foundation of this dissertation study. The variables in these theories developed the research questions, methodology, and data analysis. The variables are included in the key terms present in Chapter 1 and discussed in the theoretical framework located in Chapter 2. Table 3.1 illustrates each variable with examples provided for context.

Description of the Setting

Eighteen public school districts within two PA counties were invited to participate in the study. I purposely selected the two counties based on my own interest and the counties offering various school settings. The two counties contained a total of 29 school districts. Due to the limited time frame to conduct the study and the potential costs involved, I randomly selected nine school districts from each county by drawing their name from a jar. The school districts
ranged in size (1054 to 1788 students), their locations included four suburban, two rural, and one urban, and the socioeconomic status as determined by the Future Ready PA Index (2019) ranged from 7% to 50% of students considered economically disadvantaged.

**Table 3.1**

*Research Variables*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External</td>
<td>Laws and policies, societal views or pressure, the connection and safety teachers feel to the community they teach, and teachers’ preparation (Billingsley, 1993, p. 148).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>Administrator support, colleague support, professional development opportunities, planning time, salary and benefits, available resources, and the relationships that teachers form with their students (Billingsley, 1993)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Teachers’ age, race, ethnicity, gender, employment experience, family structure, beliefs, morals, teachers’ bias, level of cultural reciprocity, and intrinsic values. (Billingsley, 1993, p. 161)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic</td>
<td>Natural motivators, intuitive in nature, a teacher's desire or passion, faith or religion (Brown, 2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extrinsic</td>
<td>Outside motivators or rewards, salary, benefits (Bettini et al., 2017)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I received the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) approval at my college of study before beginning research. Once approved, each school district's superintendent was contacted in early June 2020, requesting permission to have each school districts’ high school ESTs participate in the study. Out of the 18 school districts, six rejected participation, and five did not respond. I also contacted the assistant superintendent of the five nonresponding school districts for a total of three attempts. The final count for this dissertation study included seven school districts that provided consenting letters to participate.

The characteristics of each school district had both similarities and differences. There were a total of eight public high schools among the seven participating school districts due to one of the school districts having two secondary schools, categorized as an intermediate high school and senior high school. Table 3.2 outlines the demographics at each of the seven school districts that agreed to participate in this study from the Future Ready PA Index and the Pennsylvania
Department of Education (PDE) for the 2019-2020 school year. Teacher salaries across the seven districts ranged from just over $43,000.00 to nearly $116,000.00. According to the National Education Association (NEA), the average Pennsylvania public school teacher’s salary was $70,258.00. The identified race of the student population at each secondary school ranged from White (45% to 82%), Black (2% to 34%), Hispanic (2% to 24%), and Asian (1% to 20%).

**Table 3.2**

**Participating Schools Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Economically Disadvantaged</th>
<th>Special Education</th>
<th>Emotional Disturbance</th>
<th>Teachers Salary Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1057</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>$43,160 - 96,980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1569</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>$48,810 - 102,425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1054</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>$49,450 - 109,840</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1292</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>$49,959 - 89,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1189</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>$49,500 - 105,333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1337</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>$57,165 - 116,721</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7\textsuperscript{a}</td>
<td>880</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>$44,931 - 98,631</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7\textsuperscript{b}</td>
<td>908</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>$44,931 - 98,631</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{a} The school district represented as number seven has two high schools. This is the intermediate high school that includes 9th and 10th graders.

\textsuperscript{b} This is the senior high school that includes 11th and 12th graders.

**Participants and Sampling Procedures**

The focus of this dissertation study is on secondary special education teachers who support students with emotional disturbance. In the state of Pennsylvania, there are approximately 21,000 special education teachers (PDE, 2019). This dissertation study focused on seven school districts with 88 special education teachers with 24 of those special education teachers labeled as ESTs. Each school district had at least one or two teachers designated as full-time ESTs. Each school district also had one or two teachers whose job responsibilities were a mix of supporting students with ED and supporting students with other disabilities. I used
nonprobability sampling by reaching out to the seven school districts that provided consent and then finding teachers interested in volunteering. This design limits the study’s generalizability but addresses my main goal of describing the experiences of a specific group (Creswell, 2012, p. 145). I specifically used convenience sampling as teachers who volunteered were convenient to me and would help address the research questions (Creswell, 2012, p. 145). I did not stratify the sample to gain as many participants as possible within the seven school districts.

The inclusion criteria for this study were (a) certified special education teachers, (b) working with students who qualify for special education services under the disability category of emotional disturbance, and (c) working for a public high school in the two designated counties. Each school district had approximately 2-4 teachers who matched the inclusion criteria, with the total number of potential participants being 24. I obtained consent and participation from 23 of the 24 potential participants. Eight novice ESTs with five or fewer years of teaching experience completed the questionnaire. Table 3.3 outlines their demographic information.

Table 3.3

Novice ESTs Demographics and Descriptive Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>75.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family structure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a relationship, no children</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>62.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a relationship, children</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>37.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5 years</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>75.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The personal factors or demographic information of participants considered veteran teachers were also analyzed to determine any similarities or differences. Fifteen veteran ESTs completed the questionnaire with six or more years of teaching experience. The veteran ESTs displayed more diversity in their age, family structure, experience as an EST, and route for certification, which is outlined in Table 3.4.

### Table 3.4

**Veteran ESTs Demographics and Descriptive Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>40.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 or older</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>93.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family structure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single, no children</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single, children</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a relationship, no children</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a relationship, children</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>73.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 years</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>33.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10 years</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>66.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Support Experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 to 5 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 to 10 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10 years</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>66.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certification route</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's Degree</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>53.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Add-on certification</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Bacc or Masters</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergency certified</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School setting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>93.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Instrumentation**

I utilized a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. The first phase of this study involved participants completing a questionnaire. Once I obtained IRB approval, I sent the link to the questionnaire and consent form via email to the superintendent or principal of each participating high school for distribution. The last item of the questionnaire requested voluntary participation in focus group interviews. If educators were interested, they included their email addresses for recruitment. I scheduled the focus group interviews for two to three weeks after the completion of the questionnaire.

Following the interviews, each participant received an individual copy of their transcript and four final clarifying questions to respond to via email. This third component, of the clarifying questions, was an addition I made to my methodology in the brainstorming stages. Litchtman (2013) identifies that written material is an essential component of a research study as it captures the thoughts, ideas, and meanings of participants (p. 231). The clarifying questions allowed participants to further expand their responses to improve this study's reliability and validity and potentially create triangulation among the different data sources.
**Questionnaire**

Billingsley and Bettini (2019) analyzed 30 published studies between 2002 and 2017 that focused on special education teachers’ attrition and retention. Out of these 30 studies, only 10 included a theoretical or conceptual framework, with Billingsley’s (1993) model used most frequently (p. 708). The identified studies (Lesh et al., 2017; Prather-Jones, 2011) created their own qualitative interview questions based on Billingsley’s (1993) framework. Similarly, I composed the electronic questionnaire of 34 questions based on Billingsley’s (1993) conceptual framework.

The questionnaire in this dissertation study was modeled off of these surveys but included 10 additional questions to address all aspects of external, employment, and personal factors. The questionnaire was created and distributed using Qualtrics (Qualtrics Inc., 2020) to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were able to complete the questionnaire without sharing any identifying information unless they included their email for focus group recruitment. Qualtrics (Qualtrics Inc., 2020) contains several processes in their security statement to guarantee consumer data protection and reliability including the use of high-end firewall systems, annual application penetration tests, and the use of Transport Layer Security (TLS) encryption.

The questionnaire consisted of 11 multiple choice questions specific to personal factors, ten Likert-scale questions specific to external factors, and ten Likert-scale questions specific to employment factors. The first question requested the participant’s informed consent. If participants selected “no”, they automatically were exited from the questionnaire. If participants chose “yes”, they completed the first block of questions, including 11 items related to personal factors. The questions were descriptive in nature to acquire demographic information from the participants regarding their age, identified gender, identified ethnicity, family structure, current
position, work experience, education, and certifications. These items were in the form of a question with several appropriate response options.

I presented the subsequent 20 questions relating to external and employment factors in a Likert-scale format associating each response with a number one to five. Participants read a statement and then selected 1-“strongly disagree”, 2- “somewhat disagree”, 3- “neutral”, 4- “somewhat agree”, or 5- “strongly agree.” I wrote the statements in a manner for “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” to indicate positive statements or identified strengths, and “somewhat disagree” or “strongly disagree” indicated negative statements or identified challenges. The last three questions involved asking the participants about their future career plans and if they were interested in participating in the focus group.

I received a total of 29 questionnaire responses. However, only 24 potential participants met the inclusion criteria from each of the eight high schools. This discrepancy meant special education teachers who did not meet the inclusion criteria attempted to complete the questionnaire, or participants may have started the survey twice. Three responses selected “no” for consent, and I automatically removed them. The consent process included the inclusion criteria, if participants did not meet the inclusion criteria, they would have selected “no.” An additional three responses were substantially incomplete, with the respondents answering less than 40% of the total number of questions. I removed these responses by deleting them entirely before examining the data. I purposely created my questionnaire in Qualtrics (Qualtrics Inc., 2020) to ensure greater confidentiality and anonymity. After reviewing the initial responses, a total of 23 completed questionnaires were analyzed and reported.

**Focus Groups**

The goal of the focus groups was for participants to expand on their responses from the questionnaire in a qualitative manner. Additionally, focus groups allow individuals to interact
with each other to stimulate conversation and trigger thoughts or ideas that may not emerge during individual interviews (Lichtman, 2013, p. 2017). The special education teachers who participated in the focus groups volunteered to be contacted through the last item of the questionnaire. This last item asked educators if they were interested in participating in a focus group and to provide their preferred email address for communication. A total of 10 participants indicated an interest in participating in the focus group (phase 2) and final clarifying questions (phase 3) of the data collection process.

The goal was to separate participants into focus groups based on their years of teaching experience to determine if novice or veteran teachers identified any difference in their experiences. The focus groups were semi-structured and anticipated to last one hour. I sent the questionnaire to the 10 participants in mid-October, requesting their consent for participation and upcoming availability. I initially received a total of six responses. All six responses were from veteran teachers with at least six years of teaching experience. I separated the respondents into two focus groups, each with three participants in total. One group included respondents that indicated they were planning on remaining in their current positions, and one group included respondents that indicated they were planning on exiting education. This was purposely done to determine any differences in responses as to why certain ESTs wanted to keep their jobs and why others were ready to leave. The veteran teachers participated in the focus groups in late October. However, only one out of the three participants in the veteran teacher group that planned on exiting education attended. This focus group then turned into an interview. I contacted the two participants who initially provided consent and agreed to the designated date/time but did not participate; however, they did not respond.

The four educators who indicated an interest in participating, but did not respond to the availability survey, were contacted again three weeks after the initial focus groups were
conducted. All four participants were considered novice special education teachers with five or fewer years of teaching experience. Two out of the four participants responded; thus, I scheduled a focus group for the following week. However, only one participant attended, turning the focus group into an interview. I contacted the one participant who initially provided consent and agreed to the designated date/time but did not participate; however, they did not respond.

I held all three focus groups virtually using the Zoom platform. All five participants provided their consent to participate in the focus groups and to be recorded. I saved the recordings to my Zoom cloud in my password-protected account and on my password-protected laptop. I provided all participants a link to the password-protected Zoom meeting via email before the scheduled focus groups. At the start of each focus group, I reviewed procedures for using Zoom, and participants had an opportunity to ask questions. I also introduced myself and provided participants a chance to share their experience as a rapport building strategy. Once participants were ready, all focus group questions were verbally shared with the participants and placed in the chat for easy reference. Participants engaged in member checking of their focus group responses in this study's final phase, which included four final clarifying questions.

**Final Clarifying Questions.** After completing the focus group or individual interviews, each participant received the four final clarifying questions via email. The purpose of these questions was to allow participants to reflect on their participation and add or clarify any information that may have impacted their responses.

The first clarifying question asked participants to review their individual transcripts to either approve their responses or identify information to be changed. The second question asked participants to reflect on if their responses were influenced in any way, particularly in the focus group setting versus completing an individual interview. I included this question to help identify any potential limitations in the design of the methods. I used a focus group setting to help
increase participants' comfort and responses to my questions. However, this could have influenced my participants' responses positively or negatively. For the focus group interviews that turned into individual interviews, I had those participants note how the change in expecting to participate in a focus group and then not, might have impacted their responses.

The third question was specific to the context of the timeframe, with the United States enduring the Coronavirus (COVID-19) national pandemic, as discussed in Chapter 1. I asked participants to reflect on how the COVID-19 national pandemic impacted their responses compared to if I conducted this study before public schools in Pennsylvania transitioned to remote or hybrid learning. The focus group's completion and final clarifying questions included compensation of a $20 electronic gift card for participants' total time in the study. The last question requested participants to identify the type of electronic gift card they wanted from three pre-identified choices.

**Data Analysis**

I collected all the data from the questionnaire, focus groups, and final clarifying questions 12 weeks after the study began. The questionnaire results were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The focus group interviews and final clarifying questions were analyzed using coding procedures. I provide a specific description of the quantitative and qualitative data analysis procedures in Figure 3.1.

**Quantitative Data Analysis**

I analyzed the questionnaire responses as soon as I collected them. First, I used Qualtrics (Qualtrics Inc., 2020) to conduct descriptive analysis. The first set of questions were personal factors, also referred to as demographic data. The second set of questions were external factors and the third set of questions were employment factors, both written in a Likert-scale format. I used descriptive statistics to identify the mean, median, mode, and standard deviation of the
responses. The mode for each Likert-scale question was analyzed to determine questions that the majority of participants (more than one-third) indicated “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” and questions that the majority indicated “somewhat disagree” or “strongly disagree.” I used results contrary to previous research findings or surprising to develop the semi-structured focus group questions. These questionnaire items required follow-up from the participants to explain their responses.

**Figure 3.1**

*Data Collection and Analysis*

![Flowchart showing data collection and analysis](chart.png)

**Notes.** Data collection and analysis started in mid-September until the end of January, for approximately a 20-week period.

I then exported the data into a Microsoft Excel (Microsoft, 2013) document. I organized the data to ensure that I associated each Likert-scale response with a numerical representation (1-5). I also reviewed the questionnaire items to identify ten questions that required comparisons to determine if novice versus veteran teachers' responses were significantly significant. I used five of these questionnaire items to develop the focus group questions, and I selected the additional five items as being of interest. Due to the small sample size, I used the Mann-Whitney U test to obtain inferential statistics. The Mann-Whitney U test is a nonparametric assessment of the null
hypothesis for randomly selected two populations' values in this study, novice and veteran teachers (Milenovic, 2011).

**Qualitative Data Analysis**

I generated five questions based on the descriptive analysis of the questionnaire responses. One question related to an external factor, two questions related to employment factors, one question related to a personal factor, and one question specific to the purpose of this research study focusing on high school special education teachers. I did not include a questionnaire item about working at the secondary level in the questionnaire. It was part of the inclusion criteria; I only sent this questionnaire to high school special education teachers. The five questions asked in the semi-structured focus groups are in Table 3.5.

First, I transcribed the recorded focus group and interview sessions verbatim, using pseudonyms for all participants. The transcribed notes were sent to all participants within one week after the scheduled focus group or interviews. I asked the participants to review their transcripts and approve the information in a process referred to as member checking. If the participants requested any changes in their responses, I documented the revisions and kept the original responses. All five participants were in full agreement and did not request any changes. All transcripts were uploaded and analyzed using Dedoose. I used this web application for data management for its accessibility and security, including HyperText Transfer Protocol, Transport Layer Security, and project-specific encryption. I reviewed the transcripts to note personal reflections and observations that occurred during the focus group and interviews.

I examined the raw data several times using provisional coding to reference my theoretical framework, including Billingsley’s (1993) framework and Ryan and Deci’s (2000) intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. First, I coded the data in relation to my research questions. Excerpts related to sub-question 1.1 were coded as “strength,” excerpts related to question 1.2
were coded as “challenge,” and excerpts related to the second research question were coded as “career plans”. Then, I reviewed the excerpts within each research question to further code the information. For sub-questions 1.1 and 1.2, the data was further coded into external, employment, and personal factors based on Billingsley’s 1993 theoretical framework. For the second research question, I further coded the excerpts into intrinsic and extrinsic motivators based on Ryan and Deci’s (2000) theory on motivation. Lastly, I also engaged in focused coding to determine the frequency of codes and to establish themes within each category of codes. Four themes emerged from the responses to sub-question 1.1, five themes from sub-question 1.2, and four themes from the second research question.

**Table 3.5**

*Focus Group Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Questionnaire Item</th>
<th>Focus Group Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External</td>
<td>Teaching is a well-respected career in society. (Q16- Likert-scale)</td>
<td>Describe how you think society views education as a career option?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>My administration supports me by understanding my job responsibilities. (Q26- Likert-scale)</td>
<td>Describe the support you receive from coworkers, including teachers and administrators?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I am supported by both my special education and general education coworkers. (Q29-Likert-scale)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>I have strong relationships with my students with ED and feel that I make a difference in their lives. (Q32-Likert-Scale)</td>
<td>Describe the relationship that you have with your students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Was working as an emotional support teacher your desired career choice? (Q12-Multiple Choice)</td>
<td>Tell me about your journey to becoming an emotional support teacher?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td>Discuss the nature of working with secondary students?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Threats to Reliability and Validity**

This dissertation study was only my second experience in conducting educational research. Therefore, a researcher with limited experience developed the questionnaire, focus
group questions, and final clarifying questions. To help increase the research tools' reliability and validity, I engaged in several techniques further described below.

Reliability

It is essential for research to have reliable measures to ensure consistency in responses. Creswell (2012) identifies that the most common factors that can impact reliability include ambiguous or unclear wording, participants are fatigued when responding, and the test administration procedures vary and are not standardized (p. 159). I engaged in several techniques to reduce threats to the reliability of the questionnaire. First, I wrote the questionnaire items at an eighth-grade reading level to help reduce the miscomprehension of the questions or response options. Four colleagues who currently work as ESTs also reviewed the questionnaire items to improve clarity. This feedback resulted in grammatical changes to help clarify the questionnaire directions and items.

Additionally, I also estimated the questionnaire to take participants 10 minutes to complete to help increase participation and reduce respondent fatigue. Qualtrics (Qualtrics Inc., 2020) recommends that questionnaires do not exceed 12 minutes to minimize participants' chance of not attempting or substantial respondent break-off. My colleagues also provided feedback regarding time completion and the electronic format's overall ease in addition to comprehension of questions and responses. Two reviewers completed the questionnaire using laptops and two using an iPhone. Specifically, I did this to ensure there were no differences in popular device viewings that could impact participants’ access or ease of completion. All reviewers completed the questionnaire in less than 10 minutes and had no issues related to format or accessibility.

Subsequently, I conducted the same exact procedures when administering the questionnaire as approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at my university of study.
This procedure included sending an email to all high school special education teachers who worked at the seven school districts that provided consenting letters. The email included the same information about the study, directions, and link to completing the Qualtrics questionnaire.

I also engaged in techniques to increase the focus group questions’ and the final clarifying questions’ reliability. The participants engaged in member checking when reviewing their individual transcripts to the focus group questions and the final clarifying questions. I emailed participants an individual copy of their focus group transcripts to review and approve. If participants wanted to revise or add any information, they had an opportunity to do so in the clarifying questions. Participants were given one week to review their individual transcripts and respond. All participants approved their focus group transcripts and did not request any changes.

I also engaged in interrater reliability with a fellow dissertation cohort member to increase the reliability of my qualitative data analysis and reduce any bias (Creswell, 2012). The dissertation cohort member was an educator with over 20 years of special education experience and trained in the technique since they used it as part of their dissertation design. We separately reviewed all of the qualitative data collected during the focus group and interviews. We reviewed the five transcripts over the course of one week and then came together one day to compare our coded excerpts. When examining the 137 total coded excerpts, we fully agreed upon the excerpts that were considered strengths or related to sub-question 1.1, the excerpts related to challenges or sub-question 1.2, and the excerpts related to career plans or research question 2. We also fully agreed on the 37 excerpts related to the second research question or career plans of my participants.

However, we had some discrepancies regarding further coding of the excerpts related to sub-questions 1.1 and 1.2 as they related to external, employment, and personal factors connected to my theoretical framework. There were 47 excerpts considered strengths, and 53
excerpts considered challenges for a total of 100 excerpts. We initially agreed upon 90 out of the 100 excerpts. We further discussed the ten excerpts that we initially did not agree upon due to the category or code. My reviewer and I came to a final agreement on 99 out of the 100 total coded excerpts by re-categorizing the excerpts. We did not agree on the one excerpt specific to a participant discussing her membership in a teacher’s union. I coded this excerpt as an external factor, and my reviewer coded it as an employment factor. The item remained an external factor based on Billingsley (1993) identifying teacher unions as having “an indirect influence on teachers’ career decisions through the modification of work conditions” (p. 148).

Validity

A study's research findings must be valid for a researcher to analyze and draw conclusions or future research recommendations. According to Creswell and Clark (2018), the most common threats to validity in an explanatory sequential design include the researcher failing to identify critical quantitative results, explaining those results with qualitative data, and not clearly connecting the quantitative and qualitative results (p. 252). I specifically designed semi-structured focus group questions based on the questionnaire responses to overcome these potential challenges. I based the questionnaire items selected for further discussion on surprising results that were contradictory or surprising compared to previous study findings on this topic. I used a joint display to illustrate the questionnaire and focus group responses in this study's results section. The joint display allowed me to connect the results and discuss how the qualitative findings expanded the quantitative findings.

Triangulation. An additional validity strategy that I used during the data analysis process includes triangulation. I collected three data sources, including the questionnaire responses, focus group transcripts, and the written responses to the final clarifying questions. Data were drawn and analyzed among these different data sources to answer the research questions. I examined
information to support the following themes: “external”, “employment”, “personal”, intrinsic”, “extrinsic”, and “career plans.” Triangulation is a critical component in a mixed-methods design to converge and corroborate the qualitative and quantitative results (Creswell & Clark, 2018, p. 290).

Limitations

There are several potential limitations to the methodology of this dissertation study. First, this study only includes a small population of participants. The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) identified 21,000 special education teachers employed in 2019. The specific number of teachers within this population that primarily worked as ESTs is not specified. However, students who qualify for ED and receive emotional support services make up 10% of all students who receive special education services in Pennsylvania (Bureau of Special Education, 2019). If the ratio of ESTs is consistent with the ratio of students who receive services, that would make approximately 2,100 ESTs in Pennsylvania. This study only focused on 23 participants, possibly only accounting for 1% of the total population. I purposefully did this sample to create as many commonalities among participants and address this study's specific research questions. However, it can limit the generalization of the findings.

Secondly, I developed a questionnaire based on Billingsley's (1993) conceptual framework. There is no preexisting reliability or validity data available to support the questionnaire because it was created and used for the first time. However, I engaged in several techniques, such as receiving professional feedback, member checking, and interrater reliability, to reduce the measures' threats to reliability and validity.

Lastly, the second phase of my methodology involved participants engaging in a focus group. However, two scheduled focus groups turned into one-on-one interviews. Two of the three participants who were planning on exiting did not attend or respond to follow-up
communication. There is a possibility that these participants already exited the field and no longer wanted to participate. Additionally, I wanted to hear from the voices of both novice and veteran ESTs in the focus groups. Three novice teachers did provide their contact information with interest in participating in a focus group, but all three novice teachers did not respond to follow-up communication when trying to schedule the focus group. The stressors associated with COVID-19 on top of the typical challenges that new special education teachers face may have made it impossible for the novice teachers to find time to participate.

**Researcher’s Bias**

I have been a high school EST for the past five years. My personal experience and knowledge on this topic have driven me to explore how we can improve retention rates for this valuable population of teachers. It has also allowed me to build rapport and trust with my participants. However, my insider status comes with a potential risk for bias. I have my own identified strengths that help motivate me to remain in my current position and challenges that cause me to feel burnout. I have to ensure that my research is a true reflection of my participants' experiences and is not shaped or impacted by my own opinion. I engaged in on-going reflective practices throughout my study's methodology to ensure any bias from my identity was not a limitation or risk. During the focus group and interviews, I wrote memos to note any thoughts, comments, or questions that arose in my head to review during data analysis. During the focus group sessions, I used questioning strategies to help my participants respond, such as elaboration, probing, appropriate wait time, and asking one question at a time (Lichtman, 2013, p. 200). These techniques allowed me to maintain a neutral position, so my responses or facial expressions did not influence participants.
Generalizability

The generalizability of results is vital for researchers and educators to understand how the results can be transferred to different settings (Lichtman, 2013, p. 299). I purposely focused on a specific population of teachers, including high school ESTs working for public school districts within two counties. My overall sample size was relatively small, with 24 participants completing the questionnaire and five participants also participating in the focus group and final clarifying questions. The small sample size and specific inclusion criteria limit the generalizability of the results.

Informed Consent and Protection of Human Subjects

My research was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at my university of study. This process verified that my participants were not harmed, maintained confidentiality, and provided informed consent. This study included two consent forms, one for completing the questionnaire and one for completing the focus group. Participants received both in an email before completing either part of the research study. The questionnaire's consent form was attached to the recruitment email and at the beginning of the questionnaire. Participants checked a box indicating “agree to participate” before completing the questionnaire. ESTs who did not provide their consent were exited from the questionnaire. Four participants did not provide their consent to complete the questionnaire.

The second phase of this research study included a virtual focus group. The last item on the questionnaire asked educators if they were interested in participating in the focus group. They were asked to write their first name and preferred email address in a text box if they choose to participate. Those who volunteered to participate in the focus group interview were sent an email to the address they identified. I shared a list of potential interview dates and times through Qualtrics. I used the platform Zoom (Zoom Video Communications Inc., 2020) to hold the focus
groups, so each invitation included the meeting ID and password. The meetings were password-protected to help ensure confidentiality. I also enabled the waiting room feature so I could verify all participants who entered the focus group.

At the beginning of each focus group, I introduced myself, re-explained the purpose of the research, and reviewed the consent form. I asked participants to avoid using their schools' real names, other teachers, administrators, and students during the interview. I reminded special education teachers that their participation was voluntary and they may stop participating by exiting the Zoom session at any time. They could also skip any questions they did not want to answer. Participants had the option of participating in Zoom using a computer, tablet, cell phone, or other digital devices. Only the audio communication was recorded with the participant’s consent using the Zoom recording feature and the Voice Memos app on my password-protected cell phone. I downloaded both recordings to my password-protected laptop in a locked filing cabinet. I will destroy all data after three years following my approved IRB application.

I removed all personally identifiable information from the focus group transcripts and responses to the clarifying questions. Unique codes replaced personal identifiers such as teacher names. I used a codebook, a separate password encrypted spreadsheet, to show the teacher identifiers' unique codes. The current study presents little to no risk to the participants. There were two potential risks identified. The first included participants feeling reluctant to share information regarding their current job positions if there was a chance their current employer identified this information. I reduced this risk by using pseudonyms to describe the participants and their employers to maintain confidentiality. The second risk included participants feeling vulnerable and slightly distressed by recognizing their own limitations, and questionnaire, interview, or reflection items can raise these feelings. I reminded all participants of their ability to skip questionnaire or focus group items and their option to stop participating at any time.
Summary

The purpose of this research design’s methodology is to answer the specific research questions posed regarding the retention and attrition of both novice and veteran high school ESTs. These questions can best be answered through an explanatory sequential design, utilizing a questionnaire (quantitative), and then having participants engage in a focus group and clarifying questions (qualitative). The next chapter includes the results of the data collection and analysis of this dissertation study.
Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to examine the strengths and challenges that public high school Emotional Support Teachers (ESTs) perceive that impact attrition and retention. I used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design by incorporating the following three phases: questionnaire, focus group/interviews, and final clarifying questions. A total of 23 questionnaires and five participant transcripts from both novice and veteran ESTs were analyzed. This research may provide information that assists colleges and universities as well as educational leaders in understanding the factors that play the biggest influence on attrition and strategies to reduce the factors that impact retention; to work towards alleviating the frequent EST turnover. I will present the key findings from data analysis in this chapter.

Data Analysis

I conducted an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to determine the job-related strengths and challenges that public high school special education teachers of students with ED identify and how those job-related factors impact their career plans. I started my investigation by creating two research questions and two sub-questions to lead my methodology:

**RQ1:** How do novice and veteran secondary special education teachers working with students who have emotional disturbance perceive external, employment, and personal factors that are related to their job satisfaction?

a. What external, employment, and personal factors are perceived to be strengths?

b. What external, employment, and personal factors are perceived to present challenges?

**RQ2:** What extrinsic and intrinsic variables related to external, employment, and personal factors do teachers working with students who have emotional disturbance report that contributes to their decision to stay in or leave their current teaching position?
First, I provide information on how the data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, inferential statistics, and qualitative data analysis. Then, I explain the results for each of the three research questions. The data will be displayed outlining the quantitative data using descriptive and inferential statistics, and then the qualitative data will follow. I engaged in deductive coding when analyzing the qualitative data since my codes were predefined based on the factors in my theoretical framework. I then reviewed each set of codes to determine patterns within the data from which themes emerged. The results section is organized by each research question, providing the quantitative data analysis and then the qualitative data analysis to expand findings as part of an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design.

**Descriptive Statistics**

The first stage in data analysis included the descriptive statistics of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was composed of items relating to ten external factors, ten employment factors, and eleven personal factors. I reviewed data for each question using descriptive statistics in Qualtrics. I wrote the external and employment factor questions in a Likert-scale format with the following range: 1-“strongly disagree”, 2- “somewhat disagree”, 3- “neutral”, 4- “somewhat agree”, or 5- “strongly agree”. The responses were translated to quantitative statistics by assigning each response with the value it was associated with (e.g. a neutral response was assigned a value of 3). I reviewed each question's mode to determine if the factor was considered a strength or a challenge. I considered the factor a strength or perceived to be supportive if the majority (at least one-third) of the respondents selected “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree”. I considered the factor a challenge if the majority (at least one-third) of the respondents chose “somewhat disagree” or “strongly disagree”. The personal factors, similar to demographics, were written as multiple choice questions with several response options and analyzed using descriptive statistics.
Inferential Statistics

I selected ten items from the questionnaire to compare if there was any statistical significance between the responses of novice and veteran ESTs. Four of the items selected directly connect to the focus group guided questions. I chose the additional six questions out of interest based on the current literature. I created a two-tailed null hypothesis for each question, assuming that the novice and veteran ESTs would have the same distribution of scores for each question comparison. I used the Mann-Whitney U test to analyze each of the ten selected questions by separating the novice ESTs responses and the veteran ESTs responses. There were a total of eight novice ESTs with five or fewer years of teaching experience and a total of 15 veteran emotional support teachers with six or more years of teaching experience. I used the Mann-Whitney U test due to the small sample size and to account for a non-normal distribution among the two groups. I compared each question at the .05 significance level. Statistical analysis identified a critical value of U at 26 to reject the null hypothesis.

Qualitative Data Analysis

I had a total of five participant transcripts to review for data analysis. Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 3 were all veteran teachers who intended to stay in their current position and participated in the focus group. Participant 4 was a veteran teacher who planned on leaving their position after this school year and participated in an interview. The last interview, Participant 5, was a novice teacher with two years of teaching experience and planned to stay in their current position.

I engaged in deductive coding when analyzing the qualitative data as my codes were based on my theoretical framework and research questions. First, I reviewed the excerpts and categorized each passage as either a strength or challenge to answer my first research question. Then, I coded all excerpts as either external factors, employment factors, or personal factors.
based on Billingsley’s (1993) framework. For example, if an excerpt focused on a participant discussing day-to-day job responsibilities, this was an example of employment factors. If the participants addressed the factor as something they enjoyed or felt was supportive, it was a strength. If the participants described the factor as something difficult or unmotivating, it was a challenge.

Next, I reviewed the excerpts to code any information related to career plans to answer the last research question. I further examined the excerpts related to career plans to determine if the participants discussed any intrinsic or extrinsic motivators impacting their decision to stay or leave based on Ryan and Deci (2000). Lastly, I determined the patterns within each set of codes to develop overarching themes. Table 4.1 displays the codes and themes that emerged during qualitative data analysis.

**Table 4.1**

*Summary of Codes and Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Excerpts</th>
<th>Research Question Alignment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strength</td>
<td>Teachers First, Friend Second</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Research Question #1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Changing the Stigma</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to Handle Stressors</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Advantages of Secondary</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge</td>
<td>Meeting Students Diverse Needs</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Research Question #2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Society’s View on Special Education</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Walking a Thin Line</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student Needs Don’t Disappear</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feeling Taken Advantage Of</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Plans</td>
<td>Forced into ES</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Research Question #3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not Intended, but Meant to Be</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intrinsic Motivator</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Extrinsic Motivator</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Question #1

How do novice and veteran secondary special education teachers working with students who have emotional disturbance perceive external, employment, and personal factors that are related to their job satisfaction?

I broke down the first research question into two sub-questions to identify which factors are strengths and which factors are considered challenges. Strengths were items that participants identified as supportive aspects of their job that they enjoyed or were satisfied with and helped promote retention. Challenges were items that participants identified as problematic, unsupportive in nature, and possibly connected to attrition. I evaluated the external, employment, and personal factors using both quantitative and qualitative data analysis.

Sub-Question 1.1
What external, employment, and personal factors are perceived to be strengths?

Quantitative Data to Address Question 1.1

The first sub-question is broken into three categories: external, employment, and personal factors that participants identified as strengths. I analyzed the questionnaire items using quantitative data analysis. I will first explain the quantitative data by using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics using the Whitney-Mann U test.

External Factors

The questionnaire included ten items written in a five-point Likert scale format related to external factors, which are one category of variables that can impact an EST’s decision to stay or leave based on Billingsley’s (1993) framework. Five external factors were considered strengths, with at least one-third of the participants either indicating “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree”. The external factor with the highest rating is participants feeling safe and connected to the community they teach, with over half of the participants indicating “strongly agree”. It is
important to note that most respondents (95%) indicated they worked for a high school located in a suburban area. Table 4.2 outlines the external factors participants considered to be strengths from descriptive statistics.

**Table 4.2**

*External Strengths*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Mode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I feel safe and connected to the community where I teach.</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>Strongly agree (52.38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am supported by local resources or organizations including my school’s teachers’ union.</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>Somewhat agree (52.38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State regulations to maintain special education certification (e.g.: ACT 48, clearances) are reasonable and appropriate.</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>Somewhat agree (38.10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My undergraduate education prepared me for my current position.</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>Somewhat agree (42.86%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The economy has not influenced my decision to stay in my current job position.</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>Somewhat agree (38.10%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The range includes 1- “strongly disagree” to 5- “strongly agree”.

I compared two of the identified strengths related to external factors using the Mann-Whitney U test to determine any statistical significance between novice and veteran ESTs. The two comparisons include the economic impact on the participant’s career plans and their undergraduate preparation. I first created a null hypothesis for each comparison. Then, I compared each question at the .05 significance level creating a critical value of U being 26 in order to reject the null hypothesis. Table 4.3 outlines how The Mann-Whitney U test indicated no statistical significance between novice and veteran ESTs for either external factor.

**Table 4.3**

*External Strengths Inferential Statistics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Item</th>
<th>H₀</th>
<th>U Value</th>
<th>Accepted or Rejected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The economy has not influenced my decision to stay in my current job position. (Q13)</td>
<td>There will not be a statistically significant difference between the economic influence on career plans of novice and veteran ESTs.</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Accepted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question Item</td>
<td>H_0</td>
<td>U Value</td>
<td>Accepted or Rejected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My undergraduate education prepared me for my current position. (Q14)</td>
<td>There will not be a statistically significant difference between the undergraduate preparation of novice and veteran ESTs.</td>
<td>54.4</td>
<td>Accepted</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Employment Factors**

The questionnaire included ten items written in a five-point Likert scale format related to employment factors, which are one category of variables that can impact an EST’s decision to stay or leave (1993). Eight employment factors were considered strengths, with at least one-third of participants indicating “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree”. The employment factor with the highest rating was strong relationship with students, with over 60% of the participants indicating “strongly agree”. The second highest employment factor was having a mentor who understood students' unique needs of students, with almost 50% of the participants indicating “strongly agree”. Table 4.4 outlines the employment factors considered to be strengths.

**Table 4.4**

*Employment Strengths*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Mode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have strong relationships with my students with ED and feel that I make a difference in their lives.</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>Strongly agree (61.90%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had/have a mentor teacher that understands the unique needs of students with E/BD.</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>Strongly agree (47.62%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My administration supports me by understanding my job responsibilities.</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>Somewhat agree (38.10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m paid fairly for my job responsibilities and requirements.</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>Somewhat agree (33.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I receive benefits such as health care and a retirement plan that are reasonable and fair.</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>Somewhat agree (52.38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am supported by both my special education and general education coworkers.</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>Somewhat agree (57.14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel supported by parents to make decisions that help their children.</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>Somewhat agree (52.38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m given autonomy and decision-making to complete my job responsibilities.</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>Somewhat agree (61.90%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The range includes 1- “strongly disagree” to 5- “strongly agree”.
I compared six of the identified strengths related to employment factors using the Mann-Whitney U test to determine any statistical significance between novice and veteran ESTs. I first created a null hypothesis for each comparison. Then, I compared each question at the .05 significance level creating a critical value of $U = 26$ to reject the null hypothesis. This test indicated no statistical significance between novice and veteran ESTs in five of six of the comparisons (support from administration, support from general education and special education teachers, support from parents, salary, and autonomy). However, the Mann-Whitney U identified the relationship that novice and veteran ESTs build with their students as statistically significant. Table 4.5 outlines how ESTs building positive relationships with their students was greater for veteran teachers (Mdn=4.79) than novice teachers (Mdn=3.625), $U = 20$, $p=.015$.

**Table 4.5**

*Employment Strengths Inferential Statistics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Item</th>
<th>$H_0$</th>
<th>U Value</th>
<th>Accepted or Rejected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My administration supports me by understanding my job responsibilities. (Q26)</td>
<td>There is no difference in how novice or veteran ESTs are supported by their administration.</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Accepted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m paid fairly for my job responsibilities and requirements. (Q27)</td>
<td>There is no difference in how novice or veteran ESTs view their pay.</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Accepted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am supported by both my special education and general education coworkers. (Q29)</td>
<td>There is no difference in how novice or veteran ESTs are supported by their coworkers.</td>
<td>55.5</td>
<td>Accepted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel supported by parents to make decisions that help their children. (Q30)</td>
<td>There is no difference in how novice or veteran ESTs are supported by parents.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Accepted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m given autonomy and decision making to complete my job responsibilities. (Q31)</td>
<td>There is no difference in the autonomy that novice or veteran ESTs have in completing their job responsibilities.</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Accepted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have strong relationships with my students with ED and feel that I make a difference in their lives. (Q32)</td>
<td>There is no difference in the relationships that novice or veteran ESTs have with their students.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Rejected</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Personal Factors

The questionnaire included 11 items regarding personal factors or demographics, which are one category of variables that can impact an EST’s decision to stay or leave based on Billingsley’s (1993) framework. I wrote these items in a multiple-choice format including three to six response options per question. The majority (n=16) of the respondents indicated that they planned on remaining in their current position as an EST based on the last questionnaire item. I analyzed the identified stayers' personal factors to determine any strengths among this population that may explain their intent to stay. I also separated the responses based on years of teaching experience to determine any additional similarities or differences among novice and veteran teachers. Six of the identified stayers were novice teachers with five or fewer years of teaching experience. All six participants identified as Caucasian, were in a relationship, and worked for a suburban school district. The majority of the novice ESTs who planned on staying had their master’s degree (n=4) and were indifferent or neutral (n=5) about working with a specific group of students within special education. Table 4.6 outlines the demographic information of the novice ESTs who plan on staying in their current position.

Ten of the identified stayers were veteran teachers with at least six years of teaching experience. The majority of veteran ESTs obtained their special education certification with their bachelor’s degree (n=6) and have earned a master’s degree (n=8). The teaching experience and professional qualifications that most stayers held are considered strengths as they have remained in the career. However, it is important to note that respondents identified their overall years of teaching experience and the number of years they worked explicitly as an EST. Two veteran teachers had five or fewer years of experience as an EST, but more than six years as a special education teacher.
Table 4.6

*Personal Factors of Identified Stayers- Novice ESTs*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>83.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family structure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a relationship, no children</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>66.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a relationship, children</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>33.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5 years</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Support Experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>83.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5 years</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certification route</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Bacc or Masters</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest degree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>33.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>66.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School setting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desired Career Choice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indifferent</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>83.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of veteran ESTs who planned on staying identified their family structure as in a relationship and with children (n=7). This variable is an identified strength as having a partner is an identified coping skill for ESTs to receive support from and increase the likelihood of staying (Cancio et al., 2018). This response is similar to novice ESTs, however, the majority of novice ESTs were in a relationship with no children (n=4). The last questionnaire item considered a personal factor asked participants if working as an EST was their desired career choice. The majority of participants selected indifferent (n=8), which meant they just wanted to
be a special education teacher, and the population of students they worked with did not matter. This response is consistent with the views of novice ESTs. This item is considered a strength since it demonstrates how participants had an open mindset which can further support retention.

Lastly, most of the veteran ESTs identified as female (n=10), Caucasian (n=9), and working at a suburban high school (n=10), which is consistent with the demographics of the novice ESTs who plan on staying in Table 4.6. These characteristics are not significant to identified stayers as they are consistent with the overall demographics of the participants found in Table 3.3. However, since the majority of respondents in this study (n=22) and all of the identified stayers (n=16) identified working at suburban high school, this item could be considered a strength increasing retention among participants since suburban districts are more likely to have resources and support for ESTs (Albrecht et al., 2009). Overall, the responses of both novice and veteran ESTs who plan on staying in regards to their demographic information were similar except for experience. Table 4.7 outlines the demographic information of the veteran ESTs who plan on staying in their current position.

**Qualitative Data to Address Question 1.1**

The focus group and interview transcripts and the final clarifying questions related to sub-question 1.1 were analyzed using qualitative data analysis. One of the codes used for data analysis was “strength,” which indicated that the participant identified a supportive or positive factor of their job, which increased their likelihood of staying. I coded 47 excerpts as “strength” among the five participant transcripts out of 137 total coded excerpts. The major themes that emerged from the data include (a) *Teachers First, Friend Second*, (b) *Changing the Stigma*, (c) *Ability to Handle Stressors*, and (d) *The Advantages of Secondary*. 
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
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<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family structure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Single, no children</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single, children</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a relationship, no children</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a relationship, children</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 years</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10 years</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Support Experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 to 10 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10 years</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certification route</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's Degree</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Add-on certification</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Bacc or Masters</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergency certified</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest degree</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>80</td>
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<tr>
<td>School setting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desired Career Choice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indifferent</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Teachers First, Friend Second**

The first theme that emerged from the focus group and interview transcripts as a strength is the importance of creating strong relationships with students. I coded this employment factor 21 times when reviewing the qualitative data. Comments included in this theme emerged after I asked the following question during the focus group and interviews: Describe the relationship you have with your students? All five participants identified the importance of not only being a teacher to students with ED but also creating almost a friendship that allows students to feel comfortable and connected. They perceived that students with ED would then trust their EST for support in both academics and assistance navigating daily stressors. Participant 5 described this relationship as “I think the relationship is to be a teacher first and supportive like a friend, so they can come to you and discuss any concerns without feeling like they're going to be told on necessarily but to feel that comfort.” All five ESTs identified creating this friendly relationship by getting to know their students' interests, frequently checking in with students to ask how they are feeling, and engaging in bonding activities like playing games.

**Changing the Stigma**

The second theme that emerged from the focus group and interview transcripts is the change in perspective of what educators think when they are working with a student with ED. I coded this employment factor 11 times when reviewing the qualitative data. Comments included in this theme emerged after I asked the following question during the focus group and interviews: Describe the support you receive from coworkers? All five participants discussed having greater support from their colleagues because their colleagues are more knowledgeable about ED. All five participants identified how students with ED tend to have a negative stigma associated with their behaviors and abilities. Participant 1 described this stigma as “changing the
perspective of the quote-unquote “bad kids”, yelling and throwing a fit and needing to be restrained.”

Specifically, three participants noted their general education colleagues as increasing their awareness of mental health disorders, attributed to changes in society and professional development opportunities offered at each participants’ employing school district. The three participants, who worked at different high schools, noted an increase in professional development specific to students' social and emotional needs in the past five years. The support that ESTs receive from their colleagues, based on professional development opportunities, can help increase retention. Professional development opportunities and support from colleagues are two identified employment factors from the questionnaire. Participant 3 further described this change as “The perception of kids with ED has evolved to students that are highly functioning and intelligent, but struggle with stress, anxiety, and executive functioning skills that impact the daily expectations placed on them.”

**The Advantages of Secondary**

A third theme that emerged as a strength from the focus group and interview transcripts was the advantages of working with high school-aged students. I coded this employment factor ten times when reviewing the qualitative data. Comments included in this theme emerged after I asked the following question during the focus group and interviews: Discuss the nature of working with secondary students? All five participants identified how high school students are more mature and coming into their own identity or personality. Additionally, four participants enjoy helping to support high school students with ED to prepare for life after graduation. All students who receive special education services in Pennsylvania must begin planning goals for their post-secondary education, employment, and independent living goals by age 14 (PaTTAN, 2018), which a high school EST supports students with ED in this process. Four participants in
this study identified this responsibility as a positive aspect of their job that they greatly enjoy. Participant 4 described this strength as "I love working at the secondary level. It's such a transition period for them, like we're building these steps to get you to real life. What do you want to do? What do you need to get there?"

**Ability to Handle Stressors**

A fourth theme that emerged from the focus group and interview transcripts is the participant’s ability to handle job-related stressors as a strength for their job requirements. I coded this personal factor five times when reviewing the qualitative data. Comments included in this theme emerged after I asked the following question during the focus group and interviews: Describe the relationship that you have with your students? Three participants identified how it is crucial to keep a work-life balance and not take students’ behaviors or words personally. Participant 5 described this ability as "If a student comes in who had a bad day, it’s not your fault, but they can take it out on you. I've learned not to let it affect me personally and try to support them the best I can."

**Integration of Strengths from Quantitative and Qualitative Data**

I used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to help me understand how the focus group and interview reporting’s of ESTs' views about strengths related to their job helped to explain the quantitative results that ESTs reported “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” on the questionnaire. Several questionnaire items produced surprising results that I wanted to hear more about my participants' how or why for their response selection. Table 4.8 outlines the factors identified as strengths from the questionnaire that participants further expanded on during the focus group and interviews.
Table 4.8

*Joint Display of Identified Strengths*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment Factors</th>
<th>Quantitative Data</th>
<th>Qualitative Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student Relationships</td>
<td>● Being a teacher and friend figure to students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mentor</td>
<td>● Having supportive coworkers with increased awareness of ED from professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>● Supporting high school-aged students with ED in obtaining post-secondary goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support from Coworkers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support from Administrators</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support from Parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Salary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Benefits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Factors</td>
<td>Overall Teaching Experience</td>
<td>● Having the personality to appropriately cope with job-related stressors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ES Teaching Experience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family Structure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Certification Route</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Level of Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Location of School District</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Desired Career Choice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Factors</td>
<td>Safe and Connected to Community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local Organizations/Resources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Undergrad preparation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>State Regulations for Certification</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No Economic Influence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sub-Question 1.2**

*What external, employment, and personal factors are perceived to be challenges?*

**Quantitative Data to Address Question 1.2**

The questionnaire, focus group, and interview transcripts were analyzed to determine what factors as part of Billingsley’s (1993) framework were considered challenges or increasing the likelihood of attrition. The second sub-question addresses this inquiry and is broken into three categories: external, employment, and personal factors that participants identified as challenges. I analyzed the questionnaire items using quantitative data analysis. I will first explain the quantitative data by using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics using the Whitney-Mann U test.
External Factors

The questionnaire included ten items written in a five-point Likert scale format related to external factors, which are one category of variables that can impact an EST’s decision to stay or leave based on Billingsley’s (1993) framework. I identified five external factors as challenges from the questionnaire, with at least one-third of the participants indicating “somewhat disagree” or “strongly disagree”. The external factor with the highest rating is more than 60% of the respondents selecting “strongly disagree” for standardized assessments, such as the Keystone exams in Pennsylvania, being an accurate measure of students with ED academic ability. Table 4.9 outlines the external factors participants considered challenges from descriptive statistics.

Table 4.9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Mode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Standardized state assessments, such as the Keystone Exams in Pennsylvania, are an accurate measure of students with ED academic ability.</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>Strongly disagree (61.90%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching is a well-respected career in society.</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>Somewhat disagree (42.86%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education state compliance requirements such as paperwork (IEP, RR, progress monitoring, etc.) are manageable.</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>Somewhat disagree (33.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The maximum number of students who receive emotional support services allowed on a caseload in PA (50- Itinerant, 20- Supplemental) is reasonable and appropriate.</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>Somewhat disagree (47.62%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania’s teacher evaluation is valid, reliable, and fair.</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>Somewhat disagree (33.33%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The range includes 1- “strongly disagree” to 5- “strongly agree”.

I compared one challenge related to external factors using the Mann-Whitney U test to determine any statistical significance between novice and veteran ESTs. The comparison included how novice and veteran ESTs viewed teaching as a well-respected career in society. First, I created a null hypothesis stating there would be no statistical significance. Then, I compared the question at the .05 significance level creating a critical value of U being 26 in
order to reject the null hypothesis. Table 4.10 outlines The Mann-Whitney U test results, indicating no statistical significance between novice and veteran ESTs responses.

**Table 4.10**

*External Challenges Inferential Statistics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Item</th>
<th>H₀</th>
<th>U Value</th>
<th>Accepted or Rejected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching is a well-respected career in society. (Q16)</td>
<td>There will not be a statistically significant difference between novice and veteran emotional support teachers viewing teaching as a well-respected career in society.</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>Accepted</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Employment Factors**

The questionnaire included ten items written in a five-point Likert scale format related to employment factors, which are one category of variables that can impact an EST’s decision to stay or leave based on Billingsley’s (1993) framework. Participants considered two employment factors as challenges from the questionnaire, with exactly one-third of the participants indicating “somewhat disagree”. There were no employment factors where the majority of respondents indicated “strongly disagree”. The two employment factors identified as challenges include professional development and planning time. Table 4.11 outlines the employment factors considered challenges from descriptive statistics.

**Table 4.11**

*Employment Challenges*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Mode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional development opportunities are offered that match my needs/interests.</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>Somewhat disagree (33.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have sufficient planning time during the day to accomplish my job responsibilities.</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>Somewhat disagree (33.33%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The range includes 1- “strongly disagree” to 5- “strongly agree”.

I compared one of the identified challenges related to employment factors using the Mann-Whitney U test to determine any statistical significance between novice and veteran ESTs.
The comparison included how novice and veteran ESTs viewed professional development opportunities. I first created a null hypothesis stating there would be no statistical significance. Then, I compared the question at the .05 significance level creating a critical value of U being 26 in order to reject the null hypothesis. Table 4.12 outlines the Mann-Whitney U test results, indicating no statistical significance between novice and veteran ESTs.

**Table 4.12**

*Employment Challenges Inferential Statistics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>$H_0$</th>
<th>U Value</th>
<th>Accepted or Rejected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional development opportunities are offered that match my needs/interests. (Q23)</td>
<td>There is no difference in professional development opportunities matching the needs and interests of novice or veteran ESTs.</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Accepted</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Personal Factors**

The questionnaire included 11 items regarding personal factors or demographics, which are one category of variables that can impact an EST's decision to stay or leave based on Billingsley's (1993) framework. Approximately 25% of the respondents ($n=7$) indicated that they no longer wanted to be an EST, with six participants planning to exit education and one planning to transfer to a different position in education. I analyzed the identified leavers' personal factors to determine any characteristics among this population that may be considered challenges and explain their intent to leave.

Contrary to the stayers, most of the identified leavers identified that being an EST was not their desired career path ($n=4$). Specifically, three of the respondents were moved into the role based on need, and one of the respondents indicated that it is where a full-time job opportunity existed within special education. These two categories were combined in Table 4.13 which outlines the personal factors for identified leavers. It is important to note that two of the
identified leavers were over 60 years old, which makes retirement a possible reason for their intent to leave the profession.

The majority of leavers identify as veteran ESTs since more veteran teachers than novice participated in this study. However, two out of the eight novice ESTs identified leaving their current position. Both novice ESTs identified as Caucasian, having one to five years of teaching experience but less than one year of experience as an EST, working for a suburban school district and obtaining their master’s degree. One of the novice ESTs identified as female, in a relationship with no children, and obtaining their special education certification through a post-baccalaureate program. The other novice EST identified as male, in a relationship with children, and obtaining their special education certification through their bachelor’s degree program. Both of the novice ESTs who planned on leaving identified working with students with ED as not their desired career choice. Table 4.13 outlines the personal factors or demographic information of both the novice (n=2) and veteran (n=5) ESTs who identified leaving their current position.

Table 4.13

Personal Factors of Identified Leavers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>85.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 or older</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family structure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single, no children</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single, children</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a relationship, children</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>71.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10 years</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>71.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Support Experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10 years</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>71.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certification route</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Bachelor's Degree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Add-on certification</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Bacc or Masters</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergency certified</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest degree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>71.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School setting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>85.71</td>
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<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desired Career Choice</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28.57</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indifferent</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.29</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Qualitative Data to Address Question 1.2**

The focus group and interview transcripts and the final clarifying questions related to sub-question 1.2 were analyzed using deductive coding. One of the codes used for the focus group and interview data was “challenge,” which indicated that the participant identified a difficult factor of their job which increased the likelihood of leaving. I coded 53 excerpts as “challenge” among the five participant transcripts out of 137 total coded excerpts. The major themes that emerged from the data include (a) *Meeting Students Diverse Needs*, (b) *Society's View on Special Education*, (c) *Walking a Thin Line*, (d) *Student Needs Don’t Disappear*, and (e) *Feeling Taken Advantage Of*.

**Meeting Students Diverse Needs**

The first theme that emerged as a challenge from the focus group and interview transcripts is the difficulty supporting the number of students on a caseload, and on top of that,
the diverse needs that each student exhibits. I coded this employment factor 20 times when reviewing the qualitative data. Comments included in this theme emerged after I asked the following question during the focus group and interviews: Describe the relationship that you have with your students? All five participants identified difficulty managing all the needs a student exhibits which can impact the relationship they build and causes ESTs to feel like they are not doing an adequate job in addressing them. Participant 4 described this challenge as “Sometimes we refer to it as whack a mole. It's like you just hit, you're constantly hitting the moles down, and new ones are popping up, and we go with it. So that's hard, we try, but it's definitely hard.” Four participants identified that if they had fewer students, they would feel like they were making the most significant impact on students’ lives and manage their job responsibilities appropriately. Participant 2 describes this goal as “I always feel like if I had one kid and all the time in the world, then I'd be able to help them be the best kid ever, but it's always like you kind of pick and choose your battles.”

Additionally, three participants identified feeling this pressure placed on them to fix the needs of students with ED. Participant 3 describes this pressure as “We do our best to have kids remain in their classes, and if they come out, we try to do a Humpty Dumpty by helping them work through it and put them back together as quickly as we can which is difficult.” This challenge of addressing diverse needs had three participants feeling unprepared or unable to do multiple roles in one. Participant 1 further describes this frustration as:

We can’t get students to pass classes when they have such serious psychiatric needs that they’re not able to function. I grapple with that the most because that's why we all went into education to help kids and to be at a point when it feels like we can’t. I'm not a doctor; I can't prescribe medication. I’m not a therapist. I can't go into the home and change things. That's hard.
**Society’s View on Special Education**

The second theme that emerged as a challenge from the focus group and interview transcripts is the negative view that special education teachers have in society. I coded this external factor 12 times when reviewing the qualitative data. Comments included in this theme emerged after I asked the following question during the focus group and interviews: Describe how you think society views education as a career option? Two participants identified the shortage of qualified applicants to fill special education positions, especially EST positions, was partially due to society viewing special education as being too difficult and steering undergrad students away from the career. Participant 1 describes this view as:

> I think that people are seeing it as a much harder career than it is. We actually were just hearing from our supervisor today that in the past, it would be candidates trying to get a job, who would be applying everywhere and they'd be kind of selling themselves to the district and trying to get a job. And at the moment, it's the reverse and districts are fighting over people to fill special education positions.

Additionally, all five participants identified specific challenges to how special education teachers are viewed at the present moment due to COVID-19. All five participants identified feeling appreciated and respected in the spring of 2020 when schools were forced to shut down. Parents realized how difficult it was to educate their children and grateful for the support that special education teachers provided. However, this view changed going into the 2020-2021 school year. Four participants identified how the government did not showcase educators as important since they were not deemed essential workers at the start of the pandemic. Participant 1 describes this frustration as “I feel it would have been helpful if upon the start of the school year that somebody in
charge would have deemed teachers as essential workers. I think that would have helped us feel valued given that classification or respect.” Four participants also identified feeling shamed by society when addressing their opinion on if teachers and students should return to in-person learning. Participant 2 described this feeling as “It felt like we went backwards. When we had to come back to school, and we voiced our concerns related to health, then we were viewed as not so great anymore.”

**Walking a Thin Line**

The third theme that emerged from the focus group and interview transcripts as a challenge is walking a thin line when it comes to supporting students but following the rules. I coded this employment factor nine times when reviewing the qualitative data. Comments included in this theme emerged after I asked the following question during the focus group and interviews: Describe the relationship that you have with your students? Participants identified a common challenge of following their employer’s regulations and considering what is best for the students they work with. Ultimately, all five participants identified how putting their students' needs first was the most important aspect of their job, even if this could jeopardize their employment. Participant 3 describes this battle as:

> So taking some risks with certain students in terms of sharing, like my cell phone number or some kind of way they could reach me if they had an issue over the weekend. It never feels good leaving here on a Friday if you know that they've already shared some things with you that might be a concern. So I've grappled with that for sure. I'm also at that point in my career where there may be a school board policy, but if it goes against what I think might be a more important choice in terms of our kids, then oh well. At this point in my career, it would be a calculated risk I'd be willing to take.
**Student Needs Don’t Disappear**

The fourth theme that emerged as a challenge from the focus group and interview transcripts was educators and administrators underestimating or overestimating a high school student with ED abilities and needs. I coded this employment factor seven times when reviewing the qualitative data. Comments included in this theme emerged after I asked the following question during the focus group and interviews: Discuss the nature of working with secondary students? Four participants identified how it is difficult to put pressure on high school students as if they are adults, but also understand they are still children too. Participant 3 describes this challenge as “I’ve noticed, probably the most working with the teenage population, is how young they still can seem yet the things they have to deal with are very adult.” Additionally, three participants identified how fellow educators or administrators assume that once a student reaches high school, they should no longer exhibit the same needs or require the same level of support that they once did. Participant 4 describes this view as:

I guess the idea is once they get to us, it's kind of like, "oh, we fixed you, you've already had all these supports, you've already had all these services, so you shouldn't have to do this by now." So that's a fight that I fight a lot because they're still working on this. This need is still a goal for them. This skill is still something we need to support them with.

All five participants also identified that educators can overestimate a high school student’s executive functioning skills in particular. High school teachers, including ESTs, can assume that students should understand school basics like coming to class on time, having the necessary materials, and turning in work by the designated due dates. This view can cause teachers to think that if a student is not doing these things, they are being lazy versus identifying that executive functioning skills are a skill deficit for them.
Participant 1 describes this view as “Sometimes even I assume that they can do it. When actually they can’t do this, they haven’t mastered the organizational skills yet to get it done. So even if I think it is simple, it doesn’t mean it is simple for them.”

**Feeling Taken Advantage Of**

The fifth theme that emerged from the focus group and interview transcripts was EST viewing their personality as a challenge. I coded this personal factor five times when reviewing the qualitative data. Comments included in this theme emerged after I asked the following question during the focus group and interviews: Tell me about your journey to becoming an emotional support teacher? Three ESTs felt like their personality traits allowed them to be successful in their role but also made administrators take advantage of their work responsibilities. Participant 4 described this challenge as “I'm a pretty easy going, yes kind of girl. So when they have those kids that don't really fit or mold into the box they need them to, I'm the one that they kind of get dumped on.” This includes getting additional students from colleagues who are not diagnosed with ED or even supporting students who are not identified yet for special education services.

**Integration of Challenges from Quantitative and Qualitative Data**

I used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to understand how the focus group and interview reporting’s of ESTs' views about challenges related to their job helped explain the quantitative results. Challenges were identified while analyzing the questionnaire data for any item that the majority (at least one-third) of ESTs reported “somewhat disagree” or “strongly disagree.” Table 4.14 outlines the factors identified as challenges from the questionnaire that participants further expanded on during the focus group, interviews, and final clarifying questions.
Table 4.14

Joint Display of Identified Challenges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External Factors</th>
<th>Quantitative Data</th>
<th>Qualitative Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Standardized Assessments</td>
<td>● Shortage of special education teachers due to negative view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Caseload Numbers</td>
<td>● Educators not deemed “essential workers” at the start of the COVID-19 national pandemic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Society’s View on Career</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>State Compliance Requirements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment Factors</td>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>● The combination of the number of students EST work with and the different types of needs that each student exhibits, creates a difficult task to manage all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Planning Time</td>
<td>● Making student’s needs a priority, even if it could jeopardize employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Administrators and coworkers assuming secondary students have mastered certain needs when they haven’t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Factors</td>
<td>Aspirations</td>
<td>● Having a flexible personality that causes administrators to take advantage of workload</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Question #2

What extrinsic and intrinsic variables related to external, employment, and personal factors do teachers working with students who have emotional disturbance report that contribute to their decision to stay in or leave their current teaching position?

Quantitative Data to Address Question 2

The last item on the questionnaire asked participants to identify what their future career plans included. Respondents had four answer choices which included: staying in their current position, transferring to a different position in special education, transferring to a different position in general education, or exiting the field of education. Almost 70% (n=16) of the respondents indicated that they planned on remaining in their current position as ESTs. More than 25% (n=6) of the respondents indicated they would be exiting education, and only one respondent indicated transferring to a different position in special education. Table 4.15 outlines the career plans of the respondents using descriptive statistics.
Table 4.15

Career Plans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Stay in current position</th>
<th>Exit education</th>
<th>Transfer in special education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are your future career plans?</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>69.57%</td>
<td>26.08%</td>
<td>4.35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The range included 1- stay in current position, 2- transfer in special education, 3- transfer to general education, and 4- exit education.

Qualitative Data to Address Question 2

The focus group and interview transcripts and the final clarifying questions related to question 2 were analyzed using deductive coding. One of the codes used for the focus group and interview data was “career plans” to answer the last research question. When participants commented on their intent to stay or leave, I coded these excerpts as “career plans.” Comments included in this theme emerged after I asked the following question during the focus group and interviews: Tell me about your journey to becoming an emotional support teacher? I coded 37 excerpts as “career plans” among the five participant transcripts out of 137 total coded excerpts. The major themes that emerged from the data include (a) Forced into Emotional Support, (b) Not Intended, but Meant To Be, (c) Intrinsic Motivators, and (d) Extrinsic Motivators.

Forced into Emotional Support

All five participants who participated in the focus group and interviews indicated that they did not plan on working with high school students with ED after graduating college. I coded ten excerpts as participants identifying how they were forced into ES. The participants obtained their current positions by a full-time contract being available at the district they were completing long-term substitution. Participant 1 describes this as “So I actually ended up here, not intentionally at first. I started out doing different subbing positions within the district and wanted a contract. One came up in emotional support, and I wanted a full-time job, so I applied.” Two
participants completed a dual-certification with their general education degree in Early Childhood Education, anticipating working at the elementary level. Participant 5 describes this as “However, there was an opportunity for me to move to high school for a contract job in emotional support, leading me to where I am now. Honestly, I never expected or imagined being a high school emotional support teacher.” Three of the participants were previously working in the learning support setting, and one of the participants worked in a life skills support classroom. One participant was transferred to the emotional support classroom after being hired for a learning support position. Participant 3 describes this change as “I was the low man on the totem pole, who's going to take those kids, so I was moved.”

*Not Intended, but Meant To Be*

Four out of the five focus group and interview participants indicated that they planned on remaining in their current position even though it was not their desired career choice. I coded eight excerpts where participants identified enjoying and wanting to stay in ES. The four participants identified developing a passion for supporting students with ED. Participant 5, identified as a novice teacher, shared, “no plans on leaving. I definitely enjoy what I'm doing. I enjoy the kids that I'm working with, most importantly. I only hope to grow and do more professional development with emotional support.” Three of the veteran ESTs indicated that their passion for supporting students with ED encouraged them to continue their education to be better prepared for their current position. Participant 1 describes this idea as “So I ended up going back for my masters in ABA (Applied Behavior Analysis) and getting certified as a BCBA (Board Certified Behavior Analyst), just to have a little bit more knowledge about this specific population.”

**Experience.** It is important to note that two of the five participants previously worked for a different school setting before obtaining their current position in a public school. Their
previous experience influences their view towards remaining. I coded three excerpts from these two participants that identified how their experience impacts their opinion. Participant 3 transferred from an alternative school to a public school supporting students with ED and describes this change in setting as a motivator to stay:

I mean, I had kids that you would be restraining, and they were jumping on my car as I was leaving work, just violent kids. And then I came into the public school, and my question was, “how do I restrain a student if they try to walk out of my English class?” and they're like, “Oh, you don't touch any students.” And I was like, “Oh my god, this is heaven, this is great!”

**Intrinsic Motivators**

I reviewed the excerpts from the focus group and interview data through a second cycle of coding using the code “intrinsic motivator” from my theoretical framework, which is also used as a theme to address the second research question. “Intrinsic motivator” indicated that the participant identified a personal reason motivating them to remain in the career or leave. I coded a total of 13 excerpts as intrinsic motivators among the five participant transcripts. All 13 excerpts were reasons for the participants to remain in the career. Participants did not identify any intrinsic motivators for wanting to leave the career. Two participants identified having empathy or a personal connection to the students they support. Participant 4 describes this connection as “I like putting myself in their shoes. I remember being 15 and not having a dad or mom around and not being able to communicate my needs. I’m able to see it from their perspective, whether it's real or not.” Three participants also identified feelings that students with ED exhibit the most significant needs, so that their role as the EST was vital. Participant 3 describes this need as “I've been here for 22 years, and I still enjoy it. I know my students need my support. They're facing drugs, alcohol, pregnancy, suicide, death, loss of peers, and have to
navigate dealing with that.” Most importantly, all four participants who identified remaining in their position identified their passion for supporting students as being the greatest motivator. Participant 2 describes this motivation as “I'm a teacher because I love kids and I want to help kids. It's not that I think that my job requires some kind of extra perks or whatever.”

**Extrinsic Motivators**

I reviewed the excerpts from the focus group and interview data through a second cycle of coding using the code “extrinsic motivator” from my theoretical framework, which is also used as a theme to address the second research question. “Extrinsic motivator” indicated that the participant identified an external or employment factor motivating them to remain in the career or leave. There were no identified extrinsic motivators that influenced the participants to stay in the field. However, there were three excerpts among two participant transcripts that I identified as extrinsic motivators for leaving the career. All three excerpts included participants identifying changes that need to be made in the overall education system. Participant 4, who identified leaving after this school year, shared, “I'm just feeling a little jaded. Our current administration or political environment doesn’t support the idea of education and students' needs. So I feel like we're just here pedaling on a bike, and we're not going anywhere, and it's frustrating.”

**Summary of Findings**

I analyzed the results of this explanatory sequential mixed-methods study using a combination of descriptive statistics, inferential statistics, and deductive coding to determine which factors public high school ESTs identify as strengths and challenges. I also examined the data by separating the ESTs into novice and veteran categories to determine any differences in responses. In the next chapter, I will further expand on these findings, interpret the results through the lens of my theoretical framework, and discuss implications for future educational practice and research.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Students with Emotional Disturbance (ED) experience frequent turnover in the Emotional Support Teachers (ESTs) that support their needs, which causes limited academic, behavioral, and social-emotional success for this population of students who are already at risk for adverse outcomes (Bettini et al., 2020; O’Brien et al., 2019). Educational leaders need to be aware of what factors are causing ESTs to leave the field and what factors can help alleviate the problem to increase retention. Specifically, researchers have found that ESTs are leaving the profession before obtaining veteran teacher status (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Cancio et al., 2018). This study explored the voices of novice and veteran ESTs who worked for public high schools in two designated counties within Pennsylvania to address attrition and retention.

The Voices of Veteran ESTs

My study aimed to follow recent research recommendations for insight into the voices of both novice and veteran ESTs (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Brown, 2018; Prather-Jones, 2011; Smith, 2018). However, most of my participants who completed the questionnaire (n=15) and focus group or interview participants (n=4) identified as veteran teachers. The results of my explanatory sequential mixed-methods design are focused on the specific voices of veteran ESTs working at school districts with similar demographics. All four of my focus group participants who identified as veteran teachers worked among three public high schools with the highest salary ranges, the lowest percentage of students who qualify for special education services, and the lowest percentage of students identified as economically disadvantaged. The voices of veteran ESTs are essential since less research is available on the factors that impact retention, an area that this population can shed light on (Brunsting et al., 2014; Hagaman & Casey, 2018). However, my participants’ experience and their employing school districts’ similar demographic information limits the generalizability of the study’s findings.
Key Findings of the Study

I discovered three major takeaways after reviewing both the quantitative and qualitative data. These factors all include the ESTs noting positives or strengths about themselves or their job, which also create significant challenges. These findings include building relationships that can take a toll on their mental health, advocating for their students at all costs, and given additional students and responsibilities that can lead to attrition among ESTs.

A Relationship Possibly Too Strong

The ESTs were exuberant when discussing the relationships they built with their students. These relationships were the most motivating factor for ESTs to wake up every day and report to their job. Getting to interact with their students personally, like catching up on how their day is going or discussing any current stressors, are the highlights of their day. This rapport helped them create a safe space for students with ED to feel comfortable and accepting of their support. At times, ESTs reported the relationship being so strong that certain students do not want to be anywhere else in the school building except for the ES classroom. Participant 5 smiled when sharing a student comment, “You're my favorite teacher, can’t I just do all my classes in here all day?” A response that any teacher should be proud to hear, especially ESTs, who are working with students who are historically unmotivated to be in the school setting (Bettini et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the ESTs described how their connection with their students was unique and different than what most general education teachers develop. Participant 3 noted the difference as “We are the people who spend the most time with our students and make these connections to know our students in different ways, a lot different than other teachers can experience.” Throughout the focus group and interview transcripts, participants described their students saying “my students” or even “my kids,” exemplifying how personal this connection can get, almost like ESTs taking a parental role. This connection can also be a heavy weight for
ESTs who may take on their students’ challenges as personal defeats. ESTs are amazing, but they do not have superpowers; they cannot solve all of their students' problems. Participant 1 described this frustration as “I’m not a doctor; I can't prescribe medication. I’m not a therapist. I can't go into the home and change things. That’s hard.”

No Limits When Advocating for Students

The ESTs were passionate about always putting their student’s needs above all else, even if it could cause them to get in trouble at work. They must make decisions on the spot with their student’s best interest in mind that sometimes do not align with their school district's policies. The priority of the school setting is grades. High school students need to pass their classes in order to graduate. However, this is not the top priority for ESTs who see other stressors, both inside and outside the school setting, as more important. Participant 3 identified hesitancy before stating, “Academics come secondary. I know that’s not a great answer, but the bottom line is, if I can keep a kid alive and not dropping out of high school, then that comes first.” This discrepancy among priorities in education can cause conflict among ESTs and their general education counterparts. Participant 2 described this battle as “You find you’re in the middle. You're trying to help the student, but you’re also trying to maintain a positive relationship with your colleagues. However, if we don’t see eye to eye, I will fight for my student.”

Additionally, ESTs were willing to not only disagree with their colleagues but also their administrators or school board. Participant 3 describes taking this risk as far as losing their job by stating, “If it goes against what I think might be a more important choice for our kids... it would be a calculated risk I'd be willing to take.” This risk included issues related to grades, disciplinary referrals, and communicating with students outside of school. Participant 5 noted, “If I notice a disciplinary referral for one of my students, and I think the administrator doesn’t have the full context, I will try to explain the variables involved even if they disagree with me.”
It is important to note that veteran teachers' voices were exemplified in this study, which could explain why the participants were more willing to take risks since they have job security. Novice teachers may feel pressure to follow the rules, even if they disagree, in order to maintain their position.

**The Ideal yet Overworked Personality**

The ESTs described feeling they had the best personality for their current position. They are able to connect with and understand their students. They are also able to learn how to handle job-related stressors described as “not to let it affect me personally” by participant 5. However, this ideal personality for their role, also comes with its setbacks. All five ESTs noted that working in the ES classroom was not their desired career choice. One of the ESTs was moved into the position, without having the option to say no. They were forced to learn how to best support students with ED even though they did not have proper experience or left with proper resources to do so. Participant 3 described this experience as “I was just kind of thrown in there. Like, 'Hey, good luck,' and I figured it out on my own.” Furthermore, their flexible personality causes administrators and colleagues to take advantage of their support and role. ESTs reported having additional students added to their caseload or to their ES classroom due to the students exhibiting challenging behaviors that were overwhelming for their special education colleagues. Administrators also place students in the ES classroom who are not identified for special education services, but need somewhere to go in the building. These students may be in trouble based on disciplinary referrals or the guidance office is filled. Some students, both on ESTs caseloads and not, can be allowed to remain in the ES classroom all day, not allowing the ES teacher to have a break from their responsibilities. Participant 5, a novice EST, described this challenge as “Sometimes it feels like my classroom is a dumping ground which isn’t fair, other
Perceived Strengths Aligning with the Framework

The purpose of this sub-question was to discover what strengths ESTs perceived relevant to the employment, personal, and external factors in Billingsley’s (1993) framework. I connected the results of this research question with the relevant literature to determine which findings were supportive, contradictory, or different than previous discoveries.

Employment Factors

The ESTs in my study noted several employment factors including student relationships, colleague support, parent support, salary and benefits, and autonomy as identified strengths of their job. These specific strengths were surprising as the current literature identifies most employment factors, such as salary, planning time, and support as challenges (Albrect et al., 2009; Billingsley, 2004; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). However, four of my focus group and interview participants worked at the highest paying school districts among my participating school districts, impacting their opinion on employment factors such as salary and benefits.

Rapport with Students. Importantly, building strong relationships with students with ED was the highest-ranked strength on the questionnaire (61.9% indicated strongly agree) and the most noted comment during the focus group and interviews. The participants emphasized they enjoyed getting to know their students, helping their students with academic, social, and personal issues, and overall feeling like their students needed an adult in their corner to help advocate for their needs. Similarly, DeMik (2008) found that special education teachers, including ESTs, reported working with students as the most favorite aspect of their job, which is consistent with how the participants in this study felt. However, Bettini et al. (2017) note the difficulty that ESTs can have in building strong relationships with their students due to the
problematic behaviors students with ED can exhibit. Relating to students was not a concern identified by the participants during the focus group or interviews. Notably, the teachers in this study more often identified their students as having internalizing behaviors such as anxiety or depression versus externalizing behaviors like physical aggression, which could explain why this was not a concern in relationship building.

**Colleague and Administrative Support.** Although recent research has identified a lack of administrator support (Conley & You, 2017; Cancio et al., 2013; Prather-Jones, 2011) and lack of coworker support (Bettini et al., 2017; Grant, 2017) as significant concerns for ESTs, the vast majority of teachers in this study identified receiving support from their colleagues, both administrators and teachers, as strengths. During the focus group and interviews, teachers noted this increase in support was due to increased awareness regarding students with ED. They explained that specific professional development opportunities offered by their districts in the past several years focused on students' needs with emotional and behavioral disorders and ways to support students with these issues.

**Personal Factors**

ESTs noted personal factors as the second-highest category of strengths based on questionnaire responses and focus group and interview comments. The majority of the 23 participants who completed the items identified as veteran teachers (n=15) and having graduate education (n=17). ESTs are at risk for having the highest percentage of emergency certified teachers or novice teachers (Billingsley et al., 2006; State et al., 2019), which is contradictory to the population of ESTs who participated in this study. Additionally, most participants worked for a suburban school district (n=22) which is connected to increased resources and support (Grant, 2017). A more diverse population of teachers could produce very different results. Besides demographic factors, participants identified their personality traits as being specific strengths for
their position. Most participants (n=14) shared they had no preference regarding the specific students they worked with before entering special education. Brown (2018) and Prather-Jones (2011b) found that ESTs with an open mindset are more likely to remain in the career based on their ability to handle and overcome job-related stressors.

**External Factors**

Lastly, external factors were the least identified strength when reviewing the quantitative and qualitative data. Most participants on the questionnaire (42.86%) felt their undergraduate education helped prepare them for their current position as an EST. This strength was surprising as previous literature has found lack of preparation as one of the major contributors to attrition among ESTs (Albrecht et al., 2009; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Grant, 2017). Fifteen participants identified the current economy was not impacting their career decision. I anticipated that most participants would disagree with this statement due to COVID-19 causing high rates of unemployment and financial instability. This stressor would have the potential to make ESTs feel forced to keep their current job. However, there were no identified excerpts to support this.

**Perceived Challenges Aligning with the Framework**

The purpose of this sub-question was to discover what challenges ESTs perceived relevant to the employment, personal, and external factors in Billingsley’s (1993) framework. I connected the results of this research question with the relevant literature to determine which findings were supportive, contradictory, or different than previous discoveries.

**External Factors**

Most of the external factors the ESTs in my study identified as challenges are consistent with the previous literature, including standardized assessments (Grant, 2017), high caseload numbers (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019), and state requirements for paperwork (Bettini et al., 2019). However, a surprising challenge related to external factors included most participants
(42.86%), indicating society’s view on special education teachers was negative. The teachers’ perceptions that society negatively views special education teachers is an interesting external factor that previous research does not adequately address. During the focus groups and interviews, participants noted COVID-19 playing a significant role in how society perceives special education teachers, which is unique to this study's timing. Participants reported feeling unappreciated or not given respect by society when not deemed essential workers from the pandemics start. Participant 3, a veteran teacher of 22 years, noted, “I feel it would have been helpful if upon the start of the school year that somebody in charge would have deemed teachers as essential workers. I think that would have helped us feel valued given that classification or respect”.

Furthermore, the 2021 presidential election in conjunction with COVID-19 impacted how ESTs felt society viewed their career. Participant 2, a veteran teacher of 8 years, shared, “It is highly divisive right now with the election coming up. I want some more leadership from the top on how special educators can support students right now versus making us feel like we are fending for ourselves.” Additionally, ESTs noted parents and administrators seemed frustrated when voicing their views on in-person learning concerns. Participant 4 describes this unwelcomed view as “special education teachers get no respect, especially right now, it’s like parents hate us if we don’t want to be in-person teaching their kids at school.” COVID-19 aside, participants felt society viewed special education teachers as a challenging and unrewarding profession, causing fewer and fewer undergrad students to want to enter the field. Participant 1 described this challenge as “we’ve had a lot of unfilled positions for a while now this year, and it’s really hard to get people into special education.”
Employment Factors

Employment factors were the second most identified challenge among the ESTs. The lack of planning time ESTs are provided (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019), and students’ varied needs with ED (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Bettini et al., 2019) are consistent challenges with previous literature. However, several surprising challenges emerged during the focus group and interviews that are unique to this study. Participants noted challenges working at the secondary level since expectations for students are greater with high school graduation requirements and planning for adulthood. Participant 3 stated the difficulties secondary students with ED can face as “They might not ever go to any other education. They may try a couple of courses at the community college or enter the working world. Our population needs help navigating all that.”

Additionally, participants felt colleagues, including administrators, tend to underestimate the support students need with specific skills such as executive functioning skills. Colleagues assumed that due to the student’s age or if it has been a disability need for a long time, that it should no longer be a skill deficit. Participants also shared how building strong relationships with their students was a highly-ranked strength; however, participants also noted its consequences. Participants felt so strongly about supporting and sticking up for their students that they would be willing to put themselves at risk regarding their job responsibilities by disagreeing with administrator or school board recommendations. Participant 1 describes this challenge as, “I know things happen at home and they don’t have anyone else. It’s a school board policy not to give out our phone numbers, but sometimes you have to.”

Personal Factors

Personal factors were identified the least as challenges when reviewing the quantitative and qualitative data. Based on leavers' questionnaire responses (n=7), most leavers (n=4) specified being an EST was not their desired career choice. Aspirations or personal goals are
considered an element of personal factors which the respondents indicated did not line up with their current position, possibly causing attrition. During the focus group and interviews, participants identified their personality as a strength and noted its drawbacks. Participants felt like their easy-going, open-minded personality was often taken advantage of by administrators, adding to or changing their responsibilities more than other special education teachers.

**Why ESTs Stay and Why they Leave the Field**

I used Billingsley’s (1993) framework and Ryan and Deci’s (2000) motivation theory to better understand why ESTs decide to stay in or leave their current teaching position. The majority of participants who completed the questionnaire (n=16) planned on staying in their current position as an EST. Intrinsic variables related to personal factors had the most significant influence on ESTs remaining in their current positions. All five focus group and interview participants identified intrinsic motivators for staying, which included having a personal connection, feeling students with ED have the greatest support needs, and an overall passion for teaching. These findings are similar to previous literature. Brown (2018) found personal factors as the greatest motivator for retention described by his participants as a calling. Lesh et al. (2017) found ESTs reported empathy for their students described as sticking up for the underdog (p. 16). However, the importance of intrinsic motivators for ESTs retention is a relatively new finding in research, with the vast amount of research finding extrinsic motivators such as employment factors having the greatest influence on retention (Albrect et al., 2009; Cancio et al., 2013; Prather-Jones, 2011a, 2011b).

It is important to note that even though a small number of participants in this study indicated transferring or leaving their current position (n=7), that is a relatively considerable amount (30%) compared to the entire sample. Two of the identified leavers were novice teachers, and five were veteran teachers. Only one of the identified leavers, a veteran EST of seven years,
described frustration with the lack of change government officials and school administrators are making for special education. Participant 4 has served as a special education teacher in various settings, including Hawaii and an urban and suburban school district within Pennsylvania. In each environment and throughout each teaching year, Participant 4 shared the challenges or concerns continuing to grow without change. Letting out a sigh of disgust, they remarked, “I feel like we're just here pedaling on a bike, and we're not going anywhere, and it's frustrating.”

**Limitations of the Study**

There are several limitations to this study that I must address when discussing the findings. First, my focus was on a particular population of teachers in order to have as many similarities among the participants as possible. Participants were all ESTs at public high schools within two designated counties in Pennsylvania. A total of 23 participants completed the questionnaire, and five participants completed the focus group or interview and final clarifying questions. My goal was to obtain both novice and veteran ESTs working at various public school locations. However, my study mainly portrays the voices of veteran teachers with similar demographic information. The participants worked for school districts with ample resources compared to school districts that may be poorly resourced. The small sample size and specific characteristics of the participants limit the conclusions drawn and the generalizability of the findings.

The next limitation includes the reliability and validity of the questionnaire. I developed the questionnaire based on Billingsley's (1993) conceptual framework. There is no preexisting reliability or validity data available to support the questionnaire since it was created and used for the first time. Previous researchers (Lesh et al., 2017; Prather-Jones, 2011; Prather-Jones, 2011b) have used Billingsley’s (1993) framework but qualitatively to guide interview focus group questions. I engaged in several techniques, including receiving professional feedback, member
checking, interrater reliability, and triangulation to reduce any threats to this study's reliability and validity, which I describe further in chapter three.

The third limitation includes potential researcher bias. I obtain insider status with the sample of teachers who participated, which could have influenced participants' responses. However, I also considered it an asset as it allowed me to build rapport and trust with my participants. I engaged in several techniques to reduce any potential limitations due to researcher bias, including ongoing reflection and appropriate questioning strategies, which I describe further in chapter three.

Lastly, the parameters set out in my doctorate program caused limitations to the study. I was enrolled in a three-year doctorate program while working full-time and set to complete my dissertation during the third year over 30 weeks. My doctorate program's structure and time requirements forced me to complete my dissertation during the COVID-19 national pandemic, significantly impacting my study and discussed in further context below.

**Impact of COVID-19**

A major limitation to the methodology and analysis of results includes the impact of the COVID-19 national pandemic. Individuals are experiencing increased levels of anxiety and stress both in the work and personal environment due to changes brought on by the pandemic. Horesh and Brown (2020) identify that the COVID-19 pandemic is a traumatic event for all individuals with the potential of leaving deep psychological scars (p. 332). All five focus group and interview participants indicated additional challenges during this current school year due to changes and restrictions of COVID-19. Participant 4 identified in the final clarifying questions how her responses during the interview were impacted by the “current environment is definitely adding an element of stressfulness that isn't typically here.”
Similarly, Participant 3, a veteran teacher, stated, “It's one of the most challenging years I've ever had. Even nine months pregnant coming in here was easier than what we're going through now.” Building relationships with students is one of the top strengths identified among employment factors that I coded 21 times when reviewing the qualitative data. However, Participant 1, a veteran teacher, stated, “That's the thing I'm struggling with more than usual is building those relationships because they're black screens on a computer, “Hello, are you there?”, “Can you please turn your camera on so I can tell you what you look like?”

During the study's recruitment phase, most public schools in the two designated counties in Pennsylvania were entirely virtual, and there was no approved COVID-19 vaccine. Initially, ten questionnaire responses indicated an interest in participating in the focus groups, but only five participants responded when contacted. Three of the participants who never responded were novice ESTs. If veteran ESTs who participated in this study identified the challenges brought on due to COVID-19 caused for a challenging year, these same challenges and possibly additional ones for novice ESTs could have prevented them from participating in the focus groups. The National Education Association (NEA) conducted a national poll to find 28% of educators identified as more likely to leave teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with one in five participants identified as novice teachers (Flannery, 2020). COVID-19 impacted the number and type (novice or veteran) of participants and the identified challenges participants perceived to face.

**Implications for Future Educational Practice**

All five participants identified intrinsic motivators as having the most significant influence on their retention. Specifically, focus group and interview participants noted having a personal connection to students with ED, feeling students with ED have the greatest needs for support, and an overall passion for the career. This finding is significant because extrinsic
motivators are easier for educational leaders to change versus intrinsic motivators that are personal and unique for each individual. This finding illustrates several recommendations for colleges and universities preparing pre-service special education teachers to help students identify if becoming an EST is the career path for them and possibly reduce attrition. Colleges can include more field experiences in different special education placements, including ES classrooms, so that pre-service teachers who do not have a personal connection to students with ED are given proper experience. College courses should create additional self-reflection opportunities for pre-service teachers to truly identify the career path and particular students in education they want to work. Lastly, special education programs could administer assessment screeners to determine the intrinsic motivation pre-service special education teachers have towards becoming ESTs to increase retention in the field.

The five focus group and interview participants did not state any specific extrinsic motivators related to their job that educational leaders could change to improve retention. However, the participants did respond to semi-structured questions, which guided discussion and could have limited responses. The questionnaire responses identify that the 23 ESTs identified the following items as challenges across external and employment factors: standardized assessments, caseload numbers, society’s view on the career, state compliance requirements, teacher evaluation, planning time, and professional development. Educational leaders making changes in these areas could help reduce the challenge or burden they cause for ESTs to increase retention.

A unique strength and challenge brought to light during the qualitative data analysis is the personal factor of the participants’ personalities. Three participants identified how their ability to cope with job-related stressors appropriately allowed them to remain in the field and create a work-life balance. In contrast, three participants identified how their easy-going and flexible
personality was a challenge as administrators would put more on their workload, including moving them to work primarily with students with ED. This study's findings illustrate how it takes a particular personality, including specific intrinsic motivators, to work with secondary students with ED. However, school districts can also help support this idea by providing teachers, especially ESTs, more opportunities for mental health or personal days, professional development focused on coping skills for staff and students, and counseling available for teachers when needed.

**Implications for Future Educational Research**

My dissertation study is one of the few, if only my knowledge, that focused specifically on high school ESTs at public schools. The research in my literature review included ESTs in elementary, middle, and high school settings. ESTs make up only a tiny percentage of teachers within a school building, making sense why previous literature has lumped grade levels together to obtain an appropriate sample size. However, students with ED at all grade levels exhibit different needs that can impact an EST’s attrition or retention. All five participants in the focus group and interviews of this study identified their relationship with their high school students as the greatest strength in their profession, with four participants also identified enjoying working on post-secondary goals with students. However, all five participants also identified difficulties specific to working at the high school level, such as the adult-like challenges the students face (graduation, drugs and alcohol, pregnancy, law enforcement), administrators and colleagues overestimating or underestimating a student’s abilities, and wanting to support and connect with students outside the school day if needed. Future research should compare ESTs' perceptions at different grade levels to determine if secondary EST may have a greater chance for attrition due to the various challenges and responsibilities at the high school level.
I was also interested in exploring if the perception of novice secondary ESTs was different from veteran secondary ESTs. However, I did not have an equal number of participants in each category to draw conclusions in addition to my small sample size. I had more veteran ESTs (n=15) than novice ESTs (n=8) willing to complete the questionnaire and participate in the focus group and interviews (n=4). Inferential statistics using the Whitney Mann-U test determined a statistical significance between more veteran ESTs noting building a strong relationship with their students compared to novice ESTs. During the focus group and interviews, four veteran ESTs participated and one novice EST; I noted no significant differences in their transcript responses. Future research should focus on gaining a greater perspective of novice ESTs' voices since the literature states this group is most at risk for leaving the field (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Cancio et al., 2018).

The majority of my participants were employed for a suburban school district (n=22), with only one participant working for a high school located in an urban school district (n=1). This one participant also identified wanting to leave the profession from the questionnaire but did not participate in the focus group or interviews. Future research needs to include the voices of secondary ESTs working at various public school settings to determine how their school's location could impact their view towards attrition or retention.

My study focused on the voices of ESTs to hear what they perceive as strengths and challenges in their daily job responsibilities. Some of the challenges identified by my participants have been challenges identified in the literature for the past 30 years, including lack of planning time and high caseload numbers (Billingsley, 1993; George et al., 1995; Pullis, 1992). The findings highlight how these concerns have continued to grow with no change, and additional challenges have evolved as well. It would be interesting for future studies to explore the voices of different stakeholders on this topic, such as the perceptions of special education
administrators. Understanding how special education administrators view the attrition and retention of ESTs can help researchers identify connections and contradictions among the responses of leaders and teachers. This information can address why changes have not occurred in the field.

**Summary**

This study adds to the existing literature regarding the attrition and retention of ESTs by identifying some evolution in results and new factors for consideration. Most of the participants identified administrator and colleague support as a strength in supporting their decision to remain in the field, which has changed from previous research perspectives. Most of the participants also identified new challenges specific to working with secondary students with ED, such as taking risks to benefit their students, advocating for continued support for their student's needs, and their personality causing administrators to take advantage of their work responsibilities. This study also explored the voices of novice and veteran ESTs during the COVID-19 national pandemic, which is a new area of interest for research. However, additional research on the factors that increase retention and reduce attrition for secondary ESTs is needed to confirm this study's findings and continue to add to the existing body of literature. It is encouraged for educational decision-makers and government leaders to make the special education teacher shortage and high turnover, especially among ESTs, a top priority before it is too late. The longer it takes for changes to be made, the more phenomenal ESTs school districts will lose, and the greater the chance students with ED will fall through the cracks.
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Appendix A

Consent Form- Questionnaire

**Project Title:** The Strengths and Challenges Perceived by Special Education Teachers of Students with Emotional Disturbance: A Mixed Methods Study

**Investigator(s):** Brittany Severino; Dr. Mimi Staulters

**Project Overview:**

Participation in this research project is voluntary and is being done by Brittany Severino as part of her Doctoral Dissertation to understand the factors that cause ED teachers to transfer or leave the field as well as what factors help motivate this population to stay. If you would like to take part, West Chester University requires that you agree and sign this consent form.

You may ask Brittany Severino any questions to help you understand this study. If you don’t want to be a part of this study, it won’t affect you. If you choose to be a part of this study, you have the right to change your mind and stop being a part of the study at any time.

1. **What is the purpose of this study?**
   - To determine the strengths and challenges that novice special education teachers experience working with students with ED.

2. **If you decide to be a part of this study, you will be asked to do the following:**
   - Complete electronic questionnaire
   - This study will take 15 minutes of your time.

3. **Are there any experimental medical treatments?**
   - No

4. **Is there any risk to me?**
   - Possible risks or sources of discomfort include: There is minimal risk associated with participating in this study. Participants may not feel uncomfortable answering questions about their job if it could impact their job. All responses will be anonymous.
   - If you become upset and wish to speak with someone, you may speak with Brittany Severino
   - If you experience discomfort, you have the right to withdraw at any time.
   - The researcher will engage in on-going reflexive practices to ensure any bias from the researcher’s identity does not cause educators to feel coerced to participate or respond in specific ways.

5. **Is there any benefit to me?**
   - Benefits to you may include: An opportunity to reflect on job-related strengths and challenges.
   - Other benefits may include: Identifying potential changes in special education to reduce the number of teachers who transfer or leave the field.

6. **How will you protect my privacy?**
   - Your records will be private. Only Brittany Severino, Dr. Mimi Staulters, and the IRB will have access to your name and responses.
   - Your name will not be used in any reports.
Records will be stored:
- Password-protected computer in a locked filing cabinet located in Brittany Severino’s home office
- Records will be destroyed three years after study completion

7. Do I get paid to take part in this study?
   - No

8. Who do I contact in case of research-related injury?
   - For any questions with this study, contact:
     - **Primary Investigator:** Brittany Severino at 215-275-0271 or bseverino@wcupa.edu
     - **Faculty Sponsor:** Dr. Mimi Staulters at 717-475-1607 or mstaulters@wcupa.edu

9. What will you do with my identifiable information?
   - Your information will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

For any questions about your rights in this research study, contact the ORSP at 610-436-3557.

I, _________________________________ (your name), have read this form and I understand the statements in this form. I know that if I am uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time. I know that it is not possible to know all possible risks in a study, and I think that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.
Consent Form- Focus Group Interviews

Project Title: The Strengths and Challenges Perceived by Special Education Teachers of Students with Emotional Disturbance (ED): A Mixed Methods Study

Investigator(s): Brittany Severino; Dr. Mimi Staulters

Project Overview:

Participation in this research project is voluntary and is being done by Brittany Severino as part of her Doctoral Dissertation to understand the factors that cause ED teachers to transfer or leave the field as well as what factors help motivate this population to stay. If you would like to take part, West Chester University requires that you agree and sign this consent form.

You may ask Brittany Severino any questions to help you understand this study. If you don’t want to be a part of this study, it won’t affect you. If you choose to be a part of this study, you have the right to change your mind and stop being a part of the study at any time.

1. What is the purpose of this study?
   o To determine the strengths and challenges that novice special education teachers experience working with students with E/BD.

2. If you decide to be a part of this study, you will be asked to do the following:
   o Focus group
   o Reflection questions
   o This study will take 1.5 hours of your time.

3. Are there any experimental medical treatments?
   o No

4. Is there any risk to me?
   o Possible risks or sources of discomfort include: There is minimal risk associated with participating in this study. Participants may not feel uncomfortable answering questions about their job if it could impact their job. Confidentiality will be maintained by the researcher.
   o If you become upset and wish to speak with someone, you may speak with Brittany Severino
   o If you experience discomfort, you have the right to withdraw at any time.
   o The researcher will engage in on-going reflexive practices to ensure any bias from the researcher’s identity does not cause educators to feel coerced to participate or respond in specific ways.

5. Is there any benefit to me?
   o Benefits to you may include: An opportunity to reflect on job-related strengths and challenges.
   o Other benefits may include: Identifying potential changes in special education to reduce the number of teachers who transfer or leave the field.

6. How will you protect my privacy?
   o The focus group (audio only) will be recorded
   o Your records will be private. Only Brittany Severino, Dr. Mimi Staulters, and the IRB will have access to your name and responses.
   o Your name will not be used in any reports.
   o Records will be stored:
• Password-protected computer in a locked filing cabinet located in Brittany Severino’s home office
  o Records will be destroyed three years after study completion

7. **Do I get paid to take part in this study?**
   o Yes
   o $20 electronic gift card to Amazon, Target, or Walmart

8. **Who do I contact in case of research-related injury?**
   o For any questions with this study, contact:
     - **Primary Investigator:** Brittany Severino at 215-275-0271 or bseverino@wcupa.edu
     - **Faculty Sponsor:** Dr. Mimi Staulters at 717-475-1607 or mstaulters@wcupa.edu

9. **What will you do with my identifiable information?**
   o Your information will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

For any questions about your rights in this research study, contact the ORSP at 610-436-3557. This protocol has been approved by the WCU IRB 20200901A.

I, ___________________________ (your name), have read this form and I understand the statements in this form. I know that if I am uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time. I know that it is not possible to know all possible risks in a study, and I think that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.
Appendix B

Recruitment Materials

Questionnaire Recruitment Email

Dear Special Education Teacher,

My name is Brittany Severino and I am a fellow high school emotional support teacher. I’m also completing my Ed.D. In Policy, Planning, and Administration from West Chester University of Pennsylvania (WCU).

My dissertation, *The Strengths and Challenges Perceived by Special Education Teachers of Students with Emotional Disturbance: A Mixed Methods Study*, has been approved by WCU and (School District). I have attached a consent form for you to review.

I’m requesting your participation by completing the following questionnaire: (Link)

Please complete the questionnaire by (DATE - 2 weeks).

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to reach out to me! This protocol has been approved by the WCU IRB 20200901A.

Thank you for your time,

Brittany Severino
Doctoral Student
College of Education and Social Work
West Chester University
bseverino@wcupa.edu

Focus Group Recruitment Email

Dear Special Education Teacher,

Thank you for your interest in participating in the next phase of my dissertation study, *The Strengths and Challenges Perceived by Special Education Teachers of Students with Emotional Disturbance: A Mixed Methods Study*.

This phase includes participating in a one-hour virtual focus group using the platform Zoom. I have attached a consent form for you to review that needs to be signed and returned if you would like to participate. Following the focus group, you will receive an email with four final questions to answer. You will also receive a $20 electronic gift card to Amazon, Target, or Walmart.

If you would like to participate in the virtual focus group, please return the consent form and use the Qualtrics link to indicate your availability. (Link)
If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to reach out to me! This protocol has been approved by the WCU IRB 20200901A.

Thank you for your time,

Brittany Severino
Doctoral Student
College of Education and Social Work
West Chester University
bseverino@wcupa.edu

**Final Questions Email**

Dear Special Education Teacher,

Thank you so much for participating in the virtual focus group a part of my dissertation study, *The Strengths and Challenges Perceived by Special Education Teachers of Students with Emotional Disturbance: A Mixed Methods Study*.

I have attached a transcript of your individual responses from the focus group. You will notice that codes were used to remove any identifiers. If you can please review your transcript and respond to the following final questions:

1) Is your transcript an accurate reflection of your focus group participation? Is there anything you would like to add or change?

2) Do you think your responses were impacted at all (positive or negative) participating in a focus group with fellow members versus completing an individual interview?

3) How has COVID-19 impacted your responses?

4) You will receive an electronic $20 gift card for completing the focus group and responding to these questions. Would you prefer Amazon, Walmart, or Target?

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to reach out to me! This protocol has been approved by the WCU IRB 20200901A.

Thank you for your time,

Brittany Severino
Doctoral Student
College of Education and Social Work
West Chester University
bseverino@wcupa.edu

**Final Email**

Dear Special Education Teacher,

You should have received an email directly from (Amazon, Walmart, or Target) with your electronic gift card. Please check all of your inboxes to ensure it was received. If you did not receive your electronic gift card or have an issue with it, please contact me immediately to resolve the issue.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to reach out to me! This protocol has been approved by the WCU IRB 20200901A.

Thank you again for your time!

Brittany Severino  
Doctoral Student  
College of Education and Social Work  
West Chester University  
bseverino@wcupa.edu
Appendix C
Research Instruments

Questionnaire

Personal Factors

The following questions on this page are personal or demographic questions. Each question is written in a multiple-choice format. You can only select one option per question. If you do not feel comfortable answering a question, you may skip it.

1) What is your identified gender?
   - Male
   - Female
   - Other

2) How old are you?
   - 20-29
   - 30-39
   - 40-49
   - 50-59
   - 60 or older

3) What is your ethnicity?
   - Caucasian
   - Black
   - Hispanic
   - Asian
   - Multi-racial
   - Other

4) How would you describe your current family structure?
   - Single with no children
   - Single with children
   - In a relationship with no children
   - In a relationship with children

5) How many years have you been teaching?
   - Less than 1 year
   - 1-5 years
   - 6-10 years
   - More than 10 years

6) Do you currently work with students who receive emotional support services?
● Yes
● No

7) How many years have you worked as an emotional support teacher?
● Less than 1 year
● 1 to 5 years
● 6 to 10 years
● More than 10 years

8) How did you receive your secondary special education certification?
● Bachelor Degree Program with K-12 or 7-12 certification
● Add-on Certification to Pre-K to 8
● Post-Bac or Masters certification
● Emergency certified
● Not certified

9) What is the highest degree that you have obtained?
● Bachelors
● Masters
● Doctorate

10) How would you describe the location of your current employer?
● Suburban
● Urban
● Rural

11) Was working as an emotional support teacher your desired career choice?
● Yes
● No, I was moved to this position by my current employer due to need
● No, but I applied since a job opportunity existed
● Indifferent, I just wanted to be a special education teacher, the population of students did not matter

External Factors

The following questions on this page evaluate external factors. Each question is written as a statement. Read each statement and then select your answer on the 5-point Likert scale. All response options have "strongly disagree" on the left and "strongly agree" on the right. You can only select one option per question. If you do not feel comfortable answering a question, you may skip it.

12) The economy has not influenced my decision to stay in my current job position.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13) My undergraduate education prepared me for my current position.</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat disagree</td>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat agree</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14) I feel safe and connected to the community where I teach.</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat disagree</td>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat agree</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15) Teaching is a well-respected career in society.</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat disagree</td>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat agree</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16) State regulations to maintain special education certification (e.g.: ACT 48, clearances) are reasonable and appropriate.</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat disagree</td>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat agree</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17) Standardized state assessments, such as the Keystone Exams in Pennsylvania, are an accurate measure of students with EB/D academic ability.</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat disagree</td>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat agree</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18) I am supported by local resources or organizations including my school’s teachers’ union.</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat disagree</td>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat agree</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19) Special education state compliance requirements such as paperwork (IEP, RR, progress monitoring, etc.) are manageable.</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat disagree</td>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat agree</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
20) The maximum number of students who receive emotional support services allowed on a caseload in PA (50- Itinerant, 20- Supplemental) is reasonable and appropriate.

21) Pennsylvania’s teacher evaluation is valid, reliable, and fair.

Employment Factors
The following questions on this page evaluate employment factors. Each question is written as a statement. Read each statement and then select your answer on the 5-point Likert scale. All response options have "strongly disagree" on the left and "strongly agree" on the right. You can only select one option per question. If you do not feel comfortable answering a question, you may skip it.

22) Professional development opportunities are offered that match my needs/interests.

23) I had/have a mentor teacher that understands the unique needs of students with E/BD.

24) I have sufficient planning time during the day to accomplish my job responsibilities.

25) My administration supports me by understanding my job responsibilities.
26) I’m paid fairly for my job responsibilities and requirements.

27) I receive benefits such as health care and a retirement plan that are reasonable and fair.

28) I am supported by both my special education and general education coworkers.

29) I feel supported by parents to make decisions that help their children.

30) I’m given autonomy and decision making to complete my job responsibilities.

31) I have strong relationships with my students with E/BD and feel that I make a difference in their lives.

Conclusion

This is the final page of the questionnaire. There is one question that requests your thoughts regarding your future career plans. This question is written in a multiple-choice format and you
may only select one response. If you feel uncomfortable answering this question, you may skip it.

The next phase of my dissertation study involves a focus group interview to further discuss the question items in this survey. Focus group interviews will be held for one, 1-hour session and compensation will be provided for your time. This is voluntary and you can choose your willingness to participate or not participate below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>32) What are your future career plans?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Stay in my current position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Find a different position in special education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Find a different position in general education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Exit the field of education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

33) Would you be interested in participating in the next phase of this research study which includes being a part of a focus group interview?

● Yes
● No

34) If you answered “yes” to the above question, what is your preferred email address for future communication? :

Semi-Structured Focus Group Questions

1) Tell me about your journey to becoming an emotional support teacher? (personal, Q-12)
2) Describe the support you receive from coworkers? (employment, Q-16 & Q-29)
3) Describe how you think society views education as a career option? (external, Q-16)
4) Discuss the nature of working with secondary students?
5) Describe the relationship that you have with your students? (employment, Q-32)

Final Clarifying Questions

1) Is your transcript an accurate reflection of your focus group participation? Is there anything you would like to add or change?
2) Do you think your responses were impacted at all (positive or negative) participating in a focus group with fellow members versus completing an individual interview?
3) How has COVID-19 impacted your responses?
4) You will receive an electronic $20 gift card for completing the focus group and responding to these questions. Would you prefer Amazon, Walmart, or Target?
Appendix D

IRB Approval

TO: Brittany (Schiavo) Severino & Mimi Stautlers
FROM: Nicole M. Cattano, Ph.D.
Co-Chair, WCU Institutional Review Board (IRB)
DATE: 8/30/2020

Project Title: The Strengths and Challenges Perceived by Special Education Teachers of Students with Emotional and/or Behavioral Disorders: A Mixed Methods Study
Date of Approval: 8/30/2020

Expedited Approval
This protocol has been approved under the new updated 45 CFR 46 common rule that went in to effect January 21, 2019. As a result, this project will not require continuing review. Any revisions to this protocol that are needed will require approval by the WCU IRB. Upon completion of the project, you are expected to submit appropriate closure documentation. Please see www.wcupa.edu/research/irb.aspx for more information.

Any adverse reaction by a research subject is to be reported immediately through the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs via email at irb@wcupa.edu.

Signature:

Co-Chair of WCU IRB

Protocol ID #: 20200901A
This Protocol ID number must be used in all communications about this project with the IRB.

WCU Institutional Review Board (IRB)
IORG#: IORG0004242
IRB#: IRB00005030
FWA#: FWA00014155