

Early Childhood Special Education Teacher Attrition

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Abstract

The problem addressed in this study was the high attrition rate in early childhood special education teachers. The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to understand experienced early childhood special education teachers' strategies to reduce attrition. The theoretical framework chosen for this study was social constructivism. The population for this study was experienced early childhood special education teachers in the United States. The final sample size was 12 current and former early childhood special education teachers with five or more years' experience in Washington State. The individual semi-structured interviews were conducted via an online platform interview either with Zoom or in person. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed through Zoom interview software. The data was then coded for themes with the help of NVivo software. The analysis approach used was thematic analysis which assisted in the discovery of 12 categories and six themes that answered the two research questions. The findings revealed multiple quotes from the participants with an abundance of positive reflections and reasons why these ECSE teachers stayed in the profession for more than four years. The study recommended avenues for early childhood teacher retention which included mentorship with an experienced team of early childhood special education teachers, constructive administrative support, a positive team culture, and professional development that is relevant for the early childhood special education teacher. The study noted that teachers need to be prepared academically, have an internship with continued mentoring, good workplace conditions, and positive administrative support.

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Table of Contents

Section 1: Foundation	1
Statement of the Problem.....	2
Purpose of the Study	3
Research Questions	4
Theoretical Framework.....	4
Definitions of Key Terms.....	5
Review of the Literature	6
Ethical Assurances	19
Summary	20
Section 2: Methodology and Design.....	22
Design and Method.....	22
Population and Sample	24
Instrumentation	25
Data Collection and Analysis.....	26
Assumptions.....	27
Limitations	28
Delimitations.....	28
Summary.....	28
Section 3: Findings, Implications, and Recommendations.....	30
Findings	30
Evaluation of the Outcomes.....	47
Implications and Recommendations for Practice	49
Recommendations for Future Research.....	51
Conclusions.....	51
References.....	53
Appendices.....	62
Appendix A Recruitment Letter.....	63
Appendix B Demographic Questionnaire.....	64
Appendix C Revised Interview Questions.....	65
Appendix D Initial Interview Questions	66
Appendix E Examples of Codes	67

Section 1: Foundation

Teacher attrition rates are high in the United States for new teachers, particularly those who work in early childhood special education (ECSE; Yates, 2025). The United States faces a critical teacher shortage that will impact future student success (Rausch et al., 2024).

Wellington et al. (2023) recently reported that the United States government has issued grants through a task force to decrease new teacher attrition rates, particularly those in special education and ECSE. ECSE teacher attrition is highly significant due to the unique needs of special education students who require specially designed instruction in school (Jeon et al., 2022).

Maready et al. (2021) suggested that new ECSE teachers with less than four years on the job are leaving due to a lack of appropriate professional development, less administrative support, and inappropriate amounts of excessive work. When teachers experience a sense of inadequacy, it weighs heavily on their work performance, confidence, and professional values. New teachers require a tremendous amount of support and care from peers, mentors, and administrators. Special education teachers have smaller caseloads and will typically pull students from their classrooms into small groups to administer specially designed instruction. The ECSE teacher takes on the role of the general education and special education teacher combined with a classroom that has a mixed population of developmental abilities (Morrison, 2018). ECSE teachers need support from their teams and a support staff that is experienced with the needs of young children with disabilities. New teachers in the ECSE system have increased barriers since they must be well educated and diverse in their teachings (Mcleod, et al., 2024). The ECSE teacher must educate a room of very young students, typically three to

five years of age, who range from typically developing to developmentally delayed (Jeon et al., 2022). Brunsting et al. (2022) stated that student behaviors increase with a lack of special education support, which makes a cyclical problem for many entering the field due to the lack of administrative, collegial support, and professional development training. Factors associated with support and training can be limiting for special education teachers, especially new special education teachers, which in turn imposes a negative effect on student behaviors and academic independence.

According to the National School Board Association (2023), students with disabilities graduate at a lower rate of 67% compared to 85% for non-disabled students, which means that less than two-thirds of the students with disabilities in the United States will earn their high school diploma. In some states, the dropout rate is as high as 35% of high school students with disabilities (OSPI, 2025). Jeon et al. (2022) concluded that experienced ECSE teachers are key to providing answers to novice teachers to reduce high rates of attrition. Additional studies are needed to identify levels of support and training that may offer solutions for ECSE teachers to remain in the field.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study was the high attrition rate in ECSE teachers (Yates, 2025). According to Rausch et al. (2024), experienced teachers, on the job for at least four years, stated that all teachers require support and appropriate training from the administration and professional development. ECSE teachers require further support since they have an exceptional caseload which includes general education and special needs students. The ECSE teacher typically provides special education support and writes the individual education program (IEP) while providing instruction to the entire classroom (Jeon

et al, 2024). Proper education with experienced ECSE teachers is critical for early childhood special needs students' foundational skills in education and behavioral success (Jeon et al., 2022). If this problem is not corrected in a timely matter, very young students with special needs will continue to lose the critical skills needed to become successful adults.

Consequently, the nation will continue to see an abundance of students with special needs without the appropriate skills needed for independent success (Rodriguez et al., 2021). This is a problem for ECSE students since their proper education is critical for their foundational skills in education and behavioral success (Jeon et al., 2024).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to understand experienced ECSE teachers' strategies to reduce attrition (Maready et al., 2021). Since the attrition rate for ECSE teachers is at a critical level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024), it was important to ask experienced teachers why they stayed in the profession and what support they were given to be successful. According to Hart Research Associates & Mathews (2022), experienced teachers were supported by their administrators, given adequate amounts of professional development and ECSE mentors, and provided with para-educators to support them with the students in the classroom. Listening to former teachers' perspectives is key to resolving the teacher attrition crisis (Yates, 2025). For this instrumental case study, the purposeful sample was comprised of ECSE teachers in Washington state. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2025), the majority of ECSE teachers work in urban areas of the state. The invitations were sent out to educational service offices in King and Pierce County which are located in the Pacific Northwest area of the state. The sample size was 12 participants who have worked and are currently working in the field for at least four years.

The data was collected through two stages: first a demographic survey through Qualtrics, then one-on-one semi-structured interviews with the teachers. The face-to-face or online interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions were then coded for themes with the help of NVivo software.

Research Questions

RQ1

What are experienced early childhood special education teachers' perspectives on why they have stayed in their profession?

RQ2

What are experienced early childhood special education teachers' perspectives on supports needed for novice teachers to stay in the field?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework chosen for this study was social constructivism. Social constructivism was developed by Lev Vygotsky which is a theory of knowledge that learners construct new knowledge through scaffolding and learning from other's environments (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). The theory developed by Vygotsky stated that knowledge is constructed through activity from humans and that the individual creates meaning through their daily interactions with others. Thus, reality is created through its members of the societal construct. The social constructivism framework incorporates the theory that individuals learn as they construct knowledge through experiences in their world. The paradigm suggests that the researchers adhere to the basic principles of ethics. The constructivist also interprets meaning from a particular standpoint or cultural perspective. Privitera and Ahlgrim-Dezell (2019) stated that there are multiple paradigms that people experience and construct individual meanings of the

world through their own experiences. Each experience contains a unique perspective with commonality and social perspective. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) acknowledged that the constructivist researcher recognizes and uses interpretations to create questions and inductively develop meaning from the data collected. The interpretive framework of social constructivism was relevant since the research participants were asked open-ended questions which gave a thick description of their own experiences.

Definitions of Key Terms

Administrative Support

Administrative support is the support received from the building principals and special education administration to staff, students, and parents (Hart Research & Mathews, 2022).

Administrator

An administrator is the primary principal or lead of a department who is responsible for the daily management of the school personnel and building operations (Beck et al., 2025).

Caseload

A caseload is the number of students the special education teacher is responsible for writing education plans and implementing specially designed instruction (Jeon et al., 2024).

Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE)

Early childhood special education (ECSE) is the specially designed instruction for disabled students in the early childhood setting (McLeod et al., 2021).

Early Childhood Special Education Teacher

An early childhood special education teacher is a teacher who is certified in special education and teaches in the early childhood education setting. An ECSE teacher is responsible for teaching early childhood students with disabilities (Jeon et al., 2022).

Individual Education Program (IEP)

An individual education program (IEP) is an annual legal plan designed to outline the services the school will provide and the specific learning goals of the student with a disability (Jeon et al., 2024).

Professional Development (PD)

Professional development (PD) is structured professional learning that results in changes in teacher practices and improvements in student learning outcomes (Yates, 2025).

Teacher Attrition

Teacher attrition is the phenomenon in which teachers leave the profession within the first 5 years of employment (Wellington et al., 2023).

Review of the Literature

ECSE teacher attrition in education has been studied through the parallel lenses of general education and special education teachers of children who are eight years of age and older (Jeon et al., 2024). The special education field is impacted greatly by ECSE teachers compared to the rest of the profession (Jeon et al., 2022; OSPI, 2025; Wellington et al., 2023). Studies concerning teacher attrition in the ECSE field have noted that ECSE novice teachers exit the profession in less than five years and at a faster rate than their general education colleagues (Brunsting et al., 2022). ECSE attrition has affected the majority of the United States with reported shortages in ECSE teachers (Yates, 2025). The lack of ECSE teachers negatively affects the most fragile of students (Guo et al., 2021; Jeon et al., 2022). Others concerned include parents of ECSE students, schools, and government (OSPI, 2023; Wellington et al., 2023). This literature review examined research regarding ECSE teacher attrition, causes of attrition, veteran

teachers' responses to retention, administrative support, and reasons required to retain ECSE teachers.

Documentation

I conducted this literature review by searching the various databases provided by National University. The search engine provided peer-reviewed education journals from full-text education books, education journals, ERIC, PsycINFO, education journals, early childhood education journals, psychology journals, SAGE, the United States government, Washington State government, the National Center for Education Statistics, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and the National Association of Special Educators. Exact search terms used included *special education teacher attrition, early childhood special education retention, teacher retention, early childhood teacher retention, early childhood special education teaching, teacher education, and strategies to keep teachers working.*

The following criteria were used for the review: scholarly, peer-reviewed journal articles and reports relevant to the research topic and published within the last 5 years. Some historical articles were references to show the history of the topic and textbooks provided by National University were used as resources relevant to this dissertation.

History of Special Education

The United States has a history of governmental challenges regarding special education needs for its citizens (Karaxha et al., 2022). Due to the culture of the past society and the stigma of special education, the government did not pass special education protections for their school-aged children until the civil rights cases that occurred in 1975 with the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), which was later reauthorized in 1990. In 2004, the EAHCA was later replaced with the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) which mandated

that all children with disabilities are entitled to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) under the law. This law pertains to all states that receive federal sponsorship (IDEA, 2022). According to the IDEA (2022), every child who is deemed eligible for special education services would receive an IEP. The IEP is the essential roadmap of the student and how their disability affects their educational success. Each IEP includes a student's disability, their present levels of performance, an at-risk statement that states how their disability affects their general education, goals for each area affected, time for services, accommodations, modifications, services required, and any other service that is needed for the individual student to obtain their FAPE (IDEA, 2022). The IEP is then reviewed on a yearly basis, and the student must be evaluated every three years to either change, remain, or discontinue services depending on the student's medical diagnosis or testing scores (IDEA, 2022). Beyond IDEA's inception and implementation, the additional legislature has continued to provide changes and standards for students with disabilities (Karaxha et al., 2022). In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was passed, which mandated that every student, including those with disabilities, be held to high standards and demonstrate their academic achievements through standardized testing or a portfolio of work (ED.Gov, 2023). Each state must adhere to its testing and standards, which are then approved of by the government. The ESSA additionally mandated that special education teachers must be highly qualified and prepared to teach students with disabilities. Retention for teachers with highly qualified capabilities and certifications has become a serious problem, especially for teachers who are caring for the most fragile of individuals (Guo et al., 2021; Jeon et al., 2024).

Currently, there are over seven million students in the United States who require special education services, representing 15% of the total student population (National Center for

Education Statistics, 2024). Each state is tasked with hiring qualified teachers and mandating certification. Producing highly qualified special education teachers is a national issue and each state is required to certify and maintain appropriate candidates to educate students with disabilities (Wellington et al., 2023).

ECSE Teacher Qualifications

Historically, early childhood teachers were able to work in some states without a degree but needed a master's degree and a formal certification for the special education portion of their expertise (Morrison, 2018). In recent history, special education teachers obtained a single certificate specifically for special education and were not required to have any other form of teaching certificate (OSPI, 2025). Each state has its requirements regarding teaching and special education. An ECSE teacher must hold at least a bachelor's degree and complete a dual certification program in early childhood and special education (OSPI, 2025). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2023), ECSE teachers are greatly needed in the United States, and the need continues to grow along with the requirements to fill the positions. Some states are allowing for emergency certifications for teaching jobs, but the few that fill the gaps are only a temporary band-aid to the solution.

Appropriate Teacher Training is Necessary for Success

Each state has specific guidelines for its teacher training programs (OSPI, 2025). The federal government continues to sponsor schools and training programs to increase retention rates and successful teaching careers (Wellington, et al., 2023). According to McLeod et al. (2021), increased retention is a result of an appropriate education and certification programs that support the increased demand for the ECSE teacher. According to the study, each program should be aligned with the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the Council for

Exceptional Children (CEC; 2023) recommended practices. The new standards began in the spring of 2023 which are an upgrade from the previous standards set in 2012. The program set forth a national standard for special education standards for children aged birth through eight years of age. There are seven standards with embedded key elements. According to the CEC (2023), the seven standards are as follows:

- Learner Development and Individual Learning Differences
- Learning Environments
- Curricular Content Knowledge
- Assessment
- Instructional Planning and Strategies
- Professional Learning and Ethical Practice
- Collaboration

The standards are the federal guideline for all ECSE teacher education, but the structured period of induction is still the responsibility of each state. Maready et al. (2021) stated that a good teacher certification program with veteran mentoring teachers will increase teacher success for at least the first three years of teaching with insightful feedback. According to the study, a large percentage agreed that the feedback portion of the mentoring process was a critical insight. Rausch et al. (2022) suggest that with a good program, teachers learn vital communication skills with parents and administrators for the success of a novice teacher. Rausch et al., continued to suggest that novice ECSE teachers in today's classroom require optimum communication and rely on the IEP team to support their students with special needs. Passmore et al. (2025) indicated that education must continue throughout the ECSE teacher's career with relevant professional development that targets the needs for specially

designed instruction and behavior support. LaCroix et al. (2023) stated that the ECSE teacher program should be an integrated process between the early childhood teacher and ECSE teacher program in which the preparation and certification is a seamless process that complies with all early childhood national standards. Since inclusion is the recommended practice in current education, early childhood teachers should have credit and experience in the special education field. Integrated programs are critical to prepare early educators to work effectively with all students and their families (La Croix et al., 2023). Park et al. (2023) suggested that each new teacher training integrates the standards set by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). The study suggested that standards set for the ECSE teacher must maintain alignment within the scope of practice and give a foundation for all early childhood education (ECE) professionals. The study continued to state three claims that education programs should follow: ECE standards are foundational knowledge for all ECE professionals, integrating the standards will guide ECE professional training and preparation programs for inclusion, and standards integration will unify professionals who work with young children.

According to Ragan et al. (2024), pre-service programs should focus on field experiences through collaborative bridge programs with ongoing support. Collaboration skills emphasize the importance of working together with general education teachers and other professionals within their buildings. The other area of importance suggested is effective communication to emphasize the importance of the family as the center of the IEP team, and classroom management techniques that help pre-service teachers especially those techniques that are specific to the needs of students with disabilities.

Roles and Responsibilities of ECSE Teachers

ECSE teachers spend the majority of their day with the students that they teach. A typical early childhood classroom contains a mixture of typically developing and special needs students (Morrison, 2018). ECSE teachers have an abundance of responsibilities and requirements above and beyond a general education or a resource special education classroom (Jeon et al., 2022; Passmore et al., 2025; Staffans & Strom, 2022). The ECSE teacher is responsible for developing each of their student's IEPs, while adapting multiple levels of service within the classroom, delivering specially designed instruction, providing physical assistance which includes toileting, changing ECE children's clothing if needed, provide feeding assistance, and use adaptive equipment to support physical needs (Jeon et al, 2022). Specialized instruction varies among each student based on disabilities and the use of explicit instruction techniques are required to implement the current evidence-based curriculum (Guo et al., 2021; McLeod et al., 2021; Szocik et al., 2024). In addition to providing specially designed instruction for ECE students, ECSE teachers must manage their student caseload (the number of students with IEPs), take the majority of their prep and after-school time to have IEP parent meetings, complete the paperwork that is involved for the special education process, and maintain records for quarterly progress reports (Brunsting et al., 2022; Chudzik et al., 2024). Additional time is required to keep up with general education tasks, teacher training, preparations, assessments of the students, behavior management, and maintain increased academic standards (Joel et al., 2024; Rausch et al., 2024). Jeon et al. (2022) indicated that high caseloads have continued to impact the ECSE in the classroom due to increased paperwork, management, and the ability to administer specially designed instruction. Caseloads are important because increased teacher attrition leads to overcrowding in the early childhood classroom (Vail & Kilgo, 2023). Staffans and Strom

(2022) indicated that ECSE teachers who travel to other schools continue to indicate their caseloads are too large to make a serious impact. Itinerant teachers are hired due to the lack of availability for ECSE classes. According to the study, the teachers indicated that their jobs are highly challenging since these ECSE teachers see an increase in severely disabled students (Staffans & Ström, 2022). The recommended staff-to-child ratio in the United States for ages three to five years of age ranges from one teacher to ten students (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2025). Currently, the average caseload for an ECSE teacher is approximately one teacher to twenty-six students which includes typically developing and special education students, which may or may not include a para-educator. According to the NAEYC (2025), other caseload concerns for ECSE teachers include a range of ages and disabilities in which the teacher must vary services for typically developing to severely impaired students. In the United States, only twenty have specific policies about caseload size which include Alabama, Arkansas, California, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. Eight states have policies that mention caseloads but no specifics about the classroom size and another twenty have no mention of caseloads in their policies (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

High Attrition Rate in Early Childhood Special Education Teachers

Early childhood special education teacher (ECSE) attrition rates are one of the highest in the United States (Wellington et al., 2023). The attrition rate is the primary cause for the shortage of teachers in this field. Jeon et al. (2022) stated that early childhood special education teachers are at high risk for teacher attrition due to their enormous responsibilities. The amount of job demand and resources available to ECSE teachers is different from other teachers which include

general educators and special educators from higher grades due to the increased demands of medically fragile children from ages three to seven years of age. Jeon et al. (2024) stated that within the last decade, the working conditions continued to degrade which has increased attrition and teachers who were interviewed stated their lives were being affected which led to increased mental health issues.

Early Childhood Special Education Teacher Reasons for Attrition

ECSE teachers have an enormous amount of job demands with limited resources provided to them. Working with young children increases the workload since traditional special education teachers work with small groups of children and they typically do not carry any general education peers within their caseloads (Jeon et al., 2022). Maready et al. (2021) suggested that many teachers, including early childhood special education teachers, are suffering from a lack of mentoring practices and appropriate frequency in supportive practice. Brunsting et al. (2022) noted that increased behaviors continue to be a leading cause of early attrition. Additional reasons for leaving the field include increased teacher stress due to the environments with high levels of behavior and workload caused by a lack of resources and support. Children with an increased need from their disabilities have additional behavioral concerns for the ECSE teacher (Jeon et al., 2022). Yates (2025) noted that it is essential to have support to strengthen performance and give advice to the novice teacher. Many teachers in the report noted that the school administration is lacking to support ECSE teachers due to available funds and the pool of qualified workers. Passmore et al. (2025) noted that leadership must step forward in the call to support the novice ECSE teacher. The roles and responsibilities are too great for one teacher with a classroom of thirteen to twenty children. The ECSE teacher feels overwhelmed which leads to unsatisfied employees with

overwhelming responsibilities (Jeon et al., 2022). Shidler (2022) stated that attrition shows historical patterns which include a lack of respect for the profession, feelings of disappointment, and helplessness to administrative cuts. Teacher recruitment is at a historical low due to the low pay, heavy work hours, and a lack of respect from the parents (Shidler, 2023).

Early Childhood Students with Disabilities Require Special Care

Kesäläinen et al. (2023) stated that individuals with high medical and behavioral challenges create an environment for special care. Ranta et al. (2023) studies revealed the importance for early childhood specially designed instruction throughout the world since supporting an early childhood student with special needs is a collaborative duty and a shared commitment by the educator, parent, and community. Ranta et al. (2023) continued to state that the director of the ECSE team is an essential part of collaborating and working through a pedagogical awareness to support these teachers with exceptional workloads and responsibilities. Vail and Kilgo (2023) demonstrated the need for special education teachers to have experience in creating consistent learning and expectations for growth. The ECSE must blend their teaching strategies for the whole classroom. Unlike a typical special education teacher who pulls their students from a general education classroom, the ECSE teacher must use a large group setting to combine their specially designed instruction. McLeod et al. (2021) study maintained that early childhood special education students require extra care and attention to receive instruction through exact preparation and work with specialized interventions such as speech therapy and occupational therapy. The team approach is a necessary component to make an ECSE teacher navigate their exquisite teaching responsibilities. Jeon et al. (2022) study demonstrated that experienced special education

teachers are critical for early childhood special needs students' foundational skills in education and behavioral success since these teachers require expertise in behavioral regulation, emotional guidance, working with physical impairment demands, and adaptive equipment. Chudzik et al. (2023) reported that trauma from the recent pandemic is a contributor to student behaviors and special educators require increased support. Chudzik et al. (2023) stated that the ECSE teacher has an increased demand in their practice since the COVID-19 virus has changed the classroom. The ECSE teacher must now incorporate the trauma of the past years' events which may involve increased parent communication and special training for additional interventions from a generation of children that have seen illness, death, and neglect through a lack of work and support for the youngest of children.

Veteran Teachers' Reasons for Staying in Special Education

Veteran teachers are a great resource in which the school and younger teaching staff need to use for support and strategies to prevent stressful issues (Feliciano-Barrett, 2023). Rausch et al. (2024) study stated that good leadership and timely training is essential for teacher retention, and a continued culture of support and appreciation is needed for the novice ESCE teacher. Chan et al. (2021) suggested that teachers need modified support systems, especially during times of crisis especially when there are multiple duties for an ESCE classroom. Chudzik et al. (2023) study explored teachers' experiences of increased attrition through a variety of teacher experiences. All veteran teachers were once beginning teachers. Mentoring support from veteran teachers is a critical key to success with support from colleagues and other ESCE teachers. Tompkins (2023) suggested that systematic changes are needed to increase the amount of teacher retention, thus creating a viable force of veteran teachers. School leaders should prioritize creating a positive culture and climate to increase

teacher retention. Mentorship programs should be tailored between novice and veteran teachers to provide meaningful support.

Administrative Supports for ESCE Teacher Retention

Administrative support is a critical key for increased retention of ESCE teachers (Walter et al., 2022). Walker et al. (2021) study indicated the need for administrators to provide increased support with para-educators in the early childhood classroom setting. Para-educator support, which is provided through the school administration, alleviates the teacher from overwork in the classroom. Valente et al. (2022) indicated that administration should provide mentorship for increased attrition. The decisions and actions of the administration provide motivation, support, and confidence for novice teachers. Schaak et al. (2022) indicated that administration must change their perspective to increase teacher attrition through increased training and collaboration through the culture of the school which allows for the growth of the new teacher when administration shows respect, expressed appreciation, trust, and respect. Additionally, Brunsting et al. (2022) also recommended that administration should demonstrate consistent expectations and support throughout the school and provide extra attention for the ESCE novice teacher in learning effective teaching strategies with their para-educator support staff. Additional support should continue through professional development that is appropriate for the ECSE teacher (Tomchek & Wheeler, 2022). As noted by Tomchek and Wheeler (2022) increased professional development is a must for the ECSE teacher and the increased need for the ECSE teacher is a must to increase retention. The professional development outline for the ECSE teacher should include the following standards: Child development and early learning, partnering with families, collaboration and teaming, assessment processes, application of curriculum frameworks with the facilitation of

meaningful learning experience, using responsive and reciprocal interaction, interventions, and instruction, and professionalism with ethical practice. Each of the following training standards should be equipped with resources, training activities, and reflective mentorship (Tomchek & Wheeler, 2022). Another area of support that is greatly needed from administration is assigning mentors to novice teachers (Spangler, 2021). The pairing of the mentor to mentee assists many school districts and is relatively low in cost since the administration can use veteran teachers on staff. Spangler (2021) continued to suggest that the mentees receive a pairing through an induction program which included availability, understanding, positive relationships, and support from the mentee. The mentor and mentee must have a similar job which allows them to better understand each other's challenges which will build a strong relationship. The strong mentor-mentee relationship is a crucial part of preparing the novice teacher to maintain a difficult position (Maready et al., 2021).

Professional Development

After the ECSE teacher has entered the field of education, it is vital to receive continued education through professional development (PD) (Hart Research Associates, 2022). PD is an effective tool to retain ECSE teachers when it is appropriate to practice and given at a mutual time period for colleagues to implement practice skills (Tomchek & Wheeler, 2022). Effective PD programs should include a combination of reflective mentorship and appropriate training. According to Kmail and Brobbey (2024), special education teachers need relevant PD such as training for students with Autism and a relevant course that is applicable to use. Simpson et al. (2023) stated in their recent study that PD can be a suitable tool for ECSE teachers when great attention is paid to the process. The study included to note that online PD programs are effective and significant for ECSE teachers when monitored,

mentored, and given to teachers with higher educational backgrounds (Simpson, et al., 2023). According to Jaskolski and Moyle (2023), PD is highly effective when given in a significant context for teachers and then reinforced with training methods and mentorship. The intention of the training must be sustained through intensity, duration, and increased use of direct teaching, coaching, and given practice of the implementation strategies.

Ethical Assurances

This study has received approval from National University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to all data collection. This study abided by an ethical code of conduct to protect as per The Belmont Report which was placed into law to protect the participants of scientific and other studies (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1978). This study obtained informed consent and the information within the consent was accurate, and included the risks, benefits, and general procedure. Each participant was informed they could drop out with no adverse consequences since the participation was solely voluntary. Completed disclosure was necessary, and confidentiality, via pseudonyms, was maintained throughout the research study. Risk to the participants was nominal and there were no ethical issues within the context of the study questions. Confidentiality and anonymity was achieved through careful data collection and security. The data from this study is being stored for three years in accordance with the IRB requirements.

As the researcher, I strived to be an unbiased instrument who obtained the data from the research participants by using verbatim recordings of the answers to the questions provided. NVIVO software was used to assist in sorting the commonalities within the context of the interviews, which reduced inherent biases, personal, and professional experiences. The

intention of this study was to discover strategies to reduce early childhood special education teacher attrition. I used discretion and refrained from bias when interpreting the results.

Summary

Teacher attrition rates are high in the United States for new early childhood special education (ECSE) teachers (Yates, 2025). Wellington et al. (2023) recently reported that the United States government has issued grants through a task force to decrease teacher attrition rates. Maready et al. (2021) suggested that early childhood special education teachers leave due to a lack of appropriate professional development, administrative support, and excessive work. When teachers experience a sense of inadequacy, it weighs heavily on their work performance, confidence, and professional value. The United States faces a critical teacher shortage that will impact future student success (Wellington et al., 2023).

According to Jeon et al. (2022), ECSE teacher attrition is highly significant due to the fragile students that require specially designed instruction in school. Brunsting et al. (2022) stated that student behaviors increase with a lack of special education support which makes a cyclical problem for many entering the field due to the lack of support and training disabling the teacher, which in turn imposes a negative effect on student behaviors and academic independence. According to the National School Board Association (2023), students with disabilities graduate at a lower rate of 67% compared to 85% for non-disabled students, which means that less than two-thirds of the students with disabilities in the United States will earn their high school diploma. In some states, the dropout rate is as high as thirty-five percent of high school students with disabilities (OSPI, 2025). Jeon et al. (2022) concluded that ECSE teachers are key to providing developmentally appropriate practice (DOP) for early childhood

students with special needs and further studies are needed to determine the level of support to provide solutions for ECSE teachers with decreased attrition rates.

The problem addressed in this study was the high attrition rate in early childhood special education teachers (Yates, 2025). This is a problem for early childhood special education students since their proper education is critical for their foundational skills in education and behavioral success (Jeon et al., 2022). The purpose of this study was to understand special education early childhood teachers' perspectives on the causes of high attrition in their field and what strategies they feel may reduce attrition (Maready et al., 2021). The theoretical framework chosen for this study was social constructivism. Social constructivism is an interpretive framework in which individuals seek to understand meaning that corresponds to their unique experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Social constructivism states that reality is socially constructed. The paradigm suggests that the researchers adhere to the basic principles of ethics. The constructivist also interprets meaning from a certain standpoint or cultural perspective. This interpretive framework is useful in phenomenological and case study research (Priya, 2021).

Section 2: Methodology and Design

Teacher attrition rates are high in the United States for new teachers, particularly those who work in early childhood special education (ECSE) (Jeon et al., 2024). The United States faces a critical teacher shortage that will impact future student success. Wellington et al. (2023) recently reported that the United States government has issued grants through a task force to decrease new teacher attrition rates, particularly those in special education and early childhood special education. Early childhood special education teacher attrition is highly significant due to the unique needs of special education students who require specially designed instruction in school (Jeon et al., 2022).

The problem addressed in this study was the high attrition rate in ECSE teachers (Yates, 2025). According to Rausch et al. (2024), experienced teachers, on the job for at least four years, stated that all teachers require support and appropriate training from the administration and professional development. ECSE teachers require further support since they have an exceptional caseload which includes general education and special needs students. The purpose of this study was to understand experienced special education early childhood teachers' strategies to reduce attrition (Maready et al., 2021). Since the attrition rate for ECSE teachers is at a critical level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024), it was important to ask experienced teachers why they stayed in the profession and what support they were given to be successful (Buchanan & Mooney, 2023).

This section will include the design and method chosen for the study, the population and sample, instrumentation, an overview of the data collection and analysis, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and a summary of section two.

Design and Method

The choice of methodology for this study was qualitative since the purpose of this study was to find strategies for new teachers to increase retention through insights from veteran teachers. Qualitative research was required since this study relied on interviews which identified the phenomenon studied, reviewed the related literature, used a selected sample, and provided interview questions that were open-ended. Qualitative research is descriptive in nature and allows for a thick description from the participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The data in qualitative research uses words and is often taken directly from quotes by the research participants. Qualitative research is naturalistic since the researchers go straight to the source (Mertler, 2019).

Another choice of methodology that was not chosen for this particular study was quantitative. Quantitative was not an appropriate choice because quantitative studies are linear in nature with closed-ended questions (Privitera & Ahlgrim-DeLzell, 2019). According to Maready et al, (2021), further research was suggested to broaden the depth of their quantitative design to further explore teacher retention strategies.

An exploratory case study design was most appropriate since it involved a detailed study of the concerned analysis within a natural setting. The exploratory or instrumental case study explores and provides important information that is relevant to the problem of early childhood special education teacher retention. Case studies are in-depth which allows the researcher to study the phenomenon under several techniques whether it be in-depth interviews, questionnaires, or observations. Case studies are descriptive, explanatory, and exploratory and case study research entails an in-depth study over a period of time, the case study method was the most appropriate for this research study (Priya, 2021). According to Privitera and Ahlgrim-DeLzell (2019), various research methods include an in-depth analysis that will reveal

perceptions and insight for the researcher. Other designs that would not be as appropriate for this research dissertation would have been ethnographic research and narrative research since they are both hearted within a particular culture or an entire culture-sharing group. (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The origins of ethnographic research are rooted in anthropology, cultural studies, and pluralistic approaches. Defining features of ethnographic studies include rituals, social patterns, and worldviews. The researcher may engross themselves within the culture and use a variety of symbols and artifacts for sources of data. According to Creswell and Poth (2019), the answers to the analysis should include a level of sharing of the culture and how the system works within the culture.

Narrative research was not appropriate because they tend to be individual stories that string commonplace through temporality, sociality, and place. According to Rice (2023), narrative research requires a deep burrowing into the lives and aspects of the study. Within the narrative research framework, this may have been more appropriate if this study were to examine deep within the lives of early childhood special education teachers, but this study was looking for professional correlations to why teachers stayed in the practice for more than four years.

Population and Sample

The population for this study was experienced ECSE teachers in the United States. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024), The highest number of ECSE teachers are in New York with approximately 3,470 ECSE teachers to the lowest number reported to be between 40-90 ECSE teachers in states such as Kentucky and Michigan. The majority of the states have between 300-680 ECSE teachers.

For this exploratory case study, a purposeful sample was collected of early childhood special education (ECSE) teachers in Washington State. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024), the majority of ECSE teachers work in urban areas of the state, so the invitations were sent out to educational service offices in King and Pierce County which are located in the Pacific Northwest area of Washington state. The sample size was 12 participants who have worked or are currently working in the field for at least four years. As suggested by Hennink and Kaiser (2022), saturation is the cornerstone for determining rigor in qualitative research, and in their latest study, the researchers determined that saturation is most valid between nine to seventeen participants. The sample participants were recruited by letter of invitation via the local school educational service office (see Appendix A). The data was collected through two stages, first a demographic survey through Qualtrics (see Appendix B), then one-on-one semi-structured interviews with the teachers. The face-to-face or online interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions were coded for themes with the help of NVivo software.

Instrumentation

The instrument chosen for this study was a selection of qualitative interview questions (see Appendix C) which were inspired by the studies from (Buchanan and Mooney, 2023; Jeon et al, 2022; Tompkins, 2023). The questions were rooted within the literature and aligned with the research questions because each stated that workplace conditions and climate contribute to teacher retention through teacher preparation programs, administration support, mentoring, and administrative support. The list of questions were field-tested because a field test provided some objective feedback from subject experts (Frey, 2018). The field test panel was comprised of seven experts in the field of early childhood special education. Three of the

panel members are currently teaching in an inclusive special education and early childhood classroom with six or more years of experience. Two were pull-out resource room model teachers for special education with early childhood students with ten or more years of experience, and two were administrators of early childhood programs who were former ECSE teachers for seven or more years. The panel reviewed the instrument for the study which was originally comprised of eight questions (see Appendix D). After the field test review, question one was revised and two and three were removed due to a lack of positive responses from the panel. The reasons for removal were indicated since the panel did not agree that these questions gathered valuable information to answer the research questions, but an example of how difficult the job is compared to general education and typical special education teachers. Question three, formerly five was revised since the panel stated that the building administration may have many different levels depending on the school one works at. According to the panel, an ECSE teacher may have one to four different administrators who supervise, support, and train one ECSE teacher. For example, an ECSE teacher may have an administrator for the building it is housed in such as an elementary school, then have another administrator for the early childhood department, one for low-income financial support, and another administrator in the special services department.

Data Collection and Analysis

The application for the study was sent to the National University Institutional Review Board (NU IRB) for review. The research was approved in August of 2024. After I obtained approval, I emailed King and Pierce County educational service centers and attached a copy of my recruitment letter. The participants were recruited through the local educational service office via email invitation for the interview. The initial demographic data was collected through a

questionnaire via Qualtrics (Black et al., 2023). After the participant information was verified, the study continued with individual semi-structured interviews with the ECSE teachers. The individual semi-structured interviews were conducted via an online platform interview with Zoom and in person. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed through Zoom interview software. The interviews and approval of transcripts concluded in April of 2025. The data was then coded for themes with the help of NVivo software. The analysis approach was thematic analysis since it is a data-informed process and represents the demonstrable facts from the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2025).

Assumptions

The first assumption in this study was that the participants were honest and objective when discussing the interview questions about their work experiences and the environment in which they chose to stay in the profession for more than four years. In the assumption of honesty by the participants, I provided in writing that their responses were protected in confidentiality to reduce any dishonesty or hesitation to respond frankly to the survey questions.

The second assumption was that all of the respondents accurately reported their certification credentials and years on the job. In the assumption of the participant's honesty, the researcher asked that the educational service centers invited only their ECSE teachers within their school districts who had at least four years of work experience in the ECSE field. The third assumption was that the participants were willing to take the time to discuss the proposed questions in detail, which happened, since the interviews averaged from 40 minutes to an hour in length.

Limitations

The first limitation was the narrow geographical location of the participants which were limited to the Pacific Northwest region of Washington State. These participants cultural influences and experiences may not be representative of the entire population of ECSE teachers. Another limitation was the small sample size which is a representative fraction to the total ECSE teachers that are working in the United States. The third limitation was the accurate perceptions and or recollections of the ECSE teachers who were participants that may have lost recall to their earlier years of teaching.

Delimitations

This study did not cover research questions regarding the negative aspects of early childhood special education teachers and why they left the job because current studies cover those questions (Brandenburg et al., 2024; Jeon et al., 2024). The second delimitation was the target population of ECSE teachers which is a specialized field because the purpose of this study was to understand experienced ECSE teachers' strategies to reduce attrition (Yates, 2025).

Summary

The choice of methodology for this study was qualitative since the purpose of this study was to find strategies for new ECSE teachers to increase retention through insights from veteran ECSE teachers. Qualitative research was required since this study relied on interviews which identified the phenomenon studied, reviewed the related literature, used a selected sample, and provided interview questions with open-ended responses (Mertler, 2019).

An exploratory case study design was most appropriate since it involved a detailed study of the concerned analysis within a natural setting. The exploratory or instrumental case study provided important information that is relevant to the problem of ECSE teacher retention. Case

studies are descriptive, explanatory, and exploratory and case study research entails an in-depth study over a period of time, the case study method was the most appropriate for the proposed research (Priya, 2021).

The population for this study was early childhood special education teachers in the United States. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024), there are 22,970 ECSE teachers. From that population, there are 850 ECSE teachers in Washington State. The sample consisted of 12 ECSE teachers in the State of Washington. The instrument chosen for this study was a qualitative interview. The list of questions were field-tested because a field test provided objective feedback from subject experts (Frey, 2018). The data was collected through individual semi-structured interviews with the ECSE teachers. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by Zoom interview software. The interviews were then coded for themes with the help of NVivo software.

Section 3: Findings, Implications, and Recommendations

Teacher attrition rates are high in the United States for new teachers, particularly those who work in ECSE (Wellington et al., 2023). Jeon et al. (2022) concluded that experienced ECSE teachers are key to providing answers to novice teachers to reduce high rates of attrition. The problem addressed in this study is the high attrition rate in ECSE teachers (Yates, 2025). The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to understand experienced ECSE teachers' strategies to reduce attrition. This section begins with the findings, organized by the research questions, evaluation of the outcomes, implications and recommendations for practice, recommendations for future research, then the conclusions.

Some limitations may have affected this study's interpretations of the findings. The first limitation is the narrow geographical location of the participants which were limited to the Pacific Northwest region of Washington State. These participants cultural influences and experiences may not be representative of the entire population of ECSE teachers. Another limitation is the small sample size which is a representative fraction to the total ECSE teachers that are working in the United States. The third limitation was the accurate perceptions and or recollections of the ECSE teachers who were participants that may have lost recall to their earlier years of teaching.

Findings

This study included interviews from 12 ECSE teachers that are currently or have been working in the ECSE field for more than four years. The sampling used was a purposeful sample since the participants needed to be experienced and certified ECSE teachers (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Each participant responded via email to a recruitment letter that was posted by Puget Sound Educational Service Centers. The participants were then given a

link to a demographic survey which queried questions about their certifications and years of experience (see Appendix B). Once the participant qualified for the survey, I emailed the participant a copy of the interview questions (see Appendix C) and requested to schedule the online or in-person interviews. In order to ensure confidentiality, the participants names were exchanged for codes P1-P12. The recorded interviews were deleted after the transcriptions were completed and verified by the ECSE teachers. The transcribed interview data is currently being stored in a password protected external hard drive solely used for research in my home. After three years, the data will be destroyed via deletion. To ensure the confidentiality and integrity of the study and its participants, all ethical procedures required by National University IRB were followed accordingly. The results of the analysis concluded that teachers stayed in the profession for more than four years because of the positive experiences, relationships with their teams, their education, and supports. In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the data, careful attention was given to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Credibility

According to Creswell and Poth (2019), credibility is defined as the worthiness or truthfulness of information shared. Creditability is reliant on the participants and their engagement of the study. Pre-interview qualifications were established through a demographic survey via Qualtrics. The participants were required to include their years of teaching in the ECSE field, the dates of their degrees and teaching certifications. In this study, member checking was used. Once the interviews were recorded and transcribed, all participants received their transcriptions via email. Member checking was ensured through each of the teachers replying to

the email, with their approvals. If deemed necessary, the ECSE teachers could have modified their data, but I did not receive any responses regarding changes.

Transferability

According to Drisko (2025), transferability is a process of abstraction used to apply information drawn from specific persons, and settings to others that have not been directly studied. Transferability should be addressed if the study intends to generalize its findings to other settings. The outcome of each study should give plenty of information to readers that were not included in the study. Readers of the study can then relate their own experiences with the given results. An abundance of information is needed for the readers to evaluate the transferability of the findings. ECSE teachers from other areas of the United States may benefit from the perceptions from the information gathered. To ensure the transferability of this study, it included the details of the participants role, assumptions, and limitations. Researchers use the term “thick descriptive” where the data provides readers an informed decision whether they can transfer the results to their current situation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Dependability

Dependability refers to the reliability and consistency of the data in a study and the level to which methodologies were documented. This allows others to examine and analyze their research procedures. If the outcomes of the study can be duplicated with the same group of participants in the same settings, then the research study can be considered dependable. By using transparency, the dependability of the study should be achieved (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). In this research study, the participants exact quotes were used throughout the findings.

Confirmability

Confirmability must be established to ensure that the researcher's own bias did not influence the outcome of the interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers must show that the findings are tied to the conclusions so they can be observed and duplicated. By providing details of the data and the process used in the study, readers can decide if they choose to accept the findings. In this study, confirmability was ensured by using the direct findings of the teachers' interview responses to answer the questions with no other influences.

A brief synopsis of the participants' demographics (see Table 1), which were conducted via Qualtrics, shows the qualifying data for the 12 participants. Each of the names were excluded for confidentiality and replaced with identifiers P1-P12. The qualified individuals each worked or are currently working in the ECSE field for five or more years. The teachers reported current positions included two (P3 and P11) who were retired from the profession, five current ECSE teachers (P1, P2, P9, P10, P12), one special education teacher of grades 3-5(P8), one elementary principal (P5), one reading intervention specialist grades K-5(P4) and one general education teacher (P6).

Table 1*Participants Demographics*

Participant (Pseudonyms)	Current Position or Retired	Years of ECSE Teaching
P1	ECSE Teacher	20+
P2	ECSE Teacher	30+
P3	Retired	9
P4	Reading Intervention Specialist K-5	13
P5	Elementary Principal	7
P6	General Education Teacher (Primary)	8
P7	Special Education Teacher (6-8)	5
P8	Special Education Teacher (3-5)	7
P9	ECSE Teacher	20+
P10	ECSE Teacher	7
P11	Retired	8
P12	ECSE Teacher	13

Any significant nuances were reported in notes during and after the interviews. The total interview consisted of the introduction of the research, review of the of the interview, recorded consent, the interview questions, and the conclusion of the interview where I thanked them and asked for an email address to send the coffee card to.

When analyzing the data, thematic analysis was used for this study. According to Braun and Clarke (2025), thematic analysis consist of a variety of steps that include the researcher to familiarize themselves with the data, generate initial codes to label significant points, then search for categories and themes that develop throughout the narrative of the data. I studied the recorded interviews, transcripts and video recordings for clarification and accuracy. After each interview, was reviewed, I imported the audio and video files into NVivo software. In analyzing the interviews, the transcripts contained a multitude of words and phrases used throughout the interviews to describe their experiences. Some of the most common words that were highlighted into codes, “knowing, or I know” was used over 179 times by all 12 participants. The words “I

enjoy/enjoyed was used by all 12 participants over 50 times in the interview transcripts. A section of sample coding with participant quotes are attached (see Appendix E).

As suggested by Hennink and Kaiser (2022), saturation is the cornerstone for determining rigor in qualitative research, and in their latest study, the researchers determined that saturation is most valid between nine to seventeen participants. Data saturation was reached when I noticed numerous similarities in the interview data after I reviewed nine consecutive participants. The similarities continued throughout the remaining transcripts. As the coding continued, categories began to develop throughout the data. Twelve categories were developed from the coding data (see table 2). This section will reveal the number of codes that comprised the category and excerpts from the interviews that helped create the category from the coded data.

Table 2

Categories

	Category	Number of codes associated with the category
1	Best Practice	31
2	ECSE Teacher Experience	24
3	Parent Relationships	17
4	Student Relationships	32
5	ECSE Teacher Success	59
6	Mentor Support	16
7	Administration Support	26
8	Staff Support	50
9	Parent Support	12
10	Community Support	5
11	College Education	60
12	Professional Development	17

The first category, best practice, highlights the learned techniques used by teachers to maintain excellence in their profession and deliver the best possible education. This category was

associated with 31 codes attached throughout the interviews. P6 stated “I believe that all students can learn by implementing the best practices and strategies with equity.”

The second category, ECSE teacher experience, was mentioned 24 times in the interviews. When teachers gain relevant experience, it leads to an increase in job satisfaction and retention. P1 stated, “There is a need for experienced and well qualified teachers at this grade level. Teachers all have a grade level they enjoy and/or are best at. Early childhood is not for everyone, especially with students who qualify for special services.” P3 stated, “I really made a difference with my professional teaching experience.”

The third category, parent relationships, was chosen as a category to emphasize the importance of a solid parent relationship to the ECSE teacher. This category was referenced 17 times within the interview data. P4 stated, “I had almost daily interaction with my families which was a gratifying experience.” P12 stated, “I was helping families understand their children.” P2 stated, “Just having that, um, relationship with the parents, the kids see that I care and the parent and so that's nice.”

The fourth category of student relationships was mentioned 32 times within the interview data. A good relationship between the ECSE teacher and student was a significant factor for teacher retention. P6 stated, “I had these very strong relationships with my students and that I treasured.” P8 stated, “So I would say that having that good teacher and student relationship is key to keeping special education teachers.”

The fifth category of ECSE teacher success displays the accomplishments that teachers achieve which allows them to be successful in their careers. This category was associated with 59 codes attached throughout the interviews. P10 stated, “It's so fun to celebrate the successes,

and I just love teaching.” P3 stated, “I ended up being very successful with those who were non-verbal. They do a lot of growing from two and a half to five.”

The sixth category of mentor support was mentioned 16 times throughout the interviews. When reading through the interviews, it was apparent that mentor support was a key factor for the ECSE teachers in their first years of teaching and when a transition occurred later in their careers. P4 stated, “My mentoring came from the other preschool teachers in the building., which was helpful getting me through my first year.” P2 stated, I had a mentor for two weeks when transitioning jobs. She stayed with me for a couple of weeks, and we team taught right next to each other, so I got a chance to know the children. I knew what skills they needed.”

The seventh category of administration support reflects the need for leadership support and environment to foster success for the ECSE teachers. This category was mentioned 26 times within the interview data. P5 stated, “My building administrator was one of my biggest advocates; they found ways to help support me and make it work, and was one of my biggest advocates, um, to continue my education.” P4 stated, “Having an administrator that supported me 100% was the most significant reason I stayed in the position of preschool special education teacher.”

The eighth category, staff support was referenced 50 times in the interview data. P2 stated, “I did have a lot of support from the people that I worked with, like the OT and Speech department, and that was very helpful as well.” P3 stated, “I had a really great para who had been working in at that school for years and years and she was really helpful in preparing me for how to deal with the community and how to deal with specific kids and what their needs were and that was very helpful.”

The ninth category, Parent support was referenced 12 times within the interview data. P4 stated, "In EC parents seemed far more supportive and involved in their child's education." P5 stated, "The supporting parents, um, and then just also, you know, really being able to work with parents kept me in the ECE." The tenth category, community support, was referenced five times within the interview data. P3 stated, "We have a large community which is very supportive with family dinner nights and community booths to help families." P6 stated, "I am part of the community with my students and volunteers." The eleventh category, college education, emphasized the importance for a solid certificate program for ECSE teachers. This category was referenced 60 times within the interview data. P6 stated, "I feel that a lot of my classes in college focused a lot on principles and practices on writing IEPs and laws." P9 stated, "So education was very well back in the eighties too. I had to take child development, and I took some early childhood classes like with preschool, and I actually had to go into the preschool and do some hands-on experiences."

The twelfth and final category, professional development, is needed to maintain ECSE teacher success. P4 referenced her national boards experience, "In 2009, I achieved certification in National Board for Professional Teaching Standards in Exceptional Needs Specialist (Special Education) for ages birth to 21. The NBPTS process by far made the biggest impact on my teaching of ECSE students. Even though I had been teaching ECSE students for some time, the NBPTS process impacted the development of my skills and made me a better teacher because of the level of personal experience and student choice for the selected entries." P6 also referenced their professional development in post classes at the University of Washington, "I had the opportunity, I went to an autism symposium that was held at UW, and I went to a sensory processing disorder class and so those opportunities for professional growth to learn about our

neurodivergent learners was something that I valued.” After developing the categories, six themes emerged that were significant in answering the research questions. The next two sections will show the themes applicable to each research question, then the findings that were discovered within the transcribed data. The table below will state the first three themes which were relevant to answer research question 1.

RQ1

What are experienced early childhood special education teachers’ perspectives on why they have stayed in their profession?

Table 3

Themes Developed Regarding RQ1

Theme	Number of times each theme was addressed by participants	Number of participants who addressed the theme
Theme 1: Multiple avenues of practice for successful teaching	54	12
Theme 2: Positive relationships increase growth	58	12
Theme 3: Success builds confidence for retention	53	12

Theme 1: Multiple Avenues of Practice for Successful Teaching. A recurring theme that emerged from the interview data was that ECSE teachers need multiple avenues of practice for successful teaching. This theme was mentioned a total of 54 times by all 12 of the participants who were interviewed. Teaching standards are often learned through experience in the profession, by peers in the field, professional development within the teacher’s district, or outside training. Throughout the interviews, each participant spoke about the most effective

methods for achieving their students' educational goals. The participants that were interviewed directly mentioned their best practice standards and how it has helped them achieve success throughout their careers. Five of the participants stated similarly that they enjoyed using evidence-based practices to meet the needs of their students to help them grow. P1 shared, "It's a best practice standard to deliver special education to delayed early childhood students." P2 stated "I've learned so many valuable strategies from my mentors and professional development." This is relevant because many of the ECSE teachers mentioned using best practice standards and how it was a positive influence on their profession. Implementing high quality standards are an instrumental element for retention since it gave teachers guidance and reference on a professionalism and quality education.

Theme 2: Positive Relationships Increase Growth. The interviews highlighted how ECSE teachers build relationships to create positive growth and development. This theme was mentioned a total of 58 times by all 12 of the participants who were interviewed. A strong and supportive relationship between teachers, parents and the student is critical for promoting growth and collaboration. The parent plays a significant role in supporting the student, reinforcing learning, and having critical input with the Individual Education Program (IEP). Seven of the participants mentioned that good communication and relationships with the students' parents was a critical factor for their success in teaching. Four of the participants interviewed were encouraged to stay in the profession by parents and had strong relationships that followed for many years. P1 stated, "It is important supporting the parents and helping them understand the process. Teaching the parents that they have a lot of control over the special education process is uplifting for me." Other participants mentioned that parents were a welcoming part of the special education process and supporting the parents played a positive role. P4 referenced

parent relationships' which included statements such as, "Almost daily interaction with a family member occurred." Most of the teachers interviewed enjoyed working with families as partners, which was a gratifying experience. P12 stated, "I have stayed in the profession for the kids, their families and my team. Helping families understand their children and how to help them. I feel like I am serving a higher purpose by bettering my community." P8 stated, "The students want that relationship with you. They are fun and they tell you how it is. There is no sugar coating it." Overall, the importance of building relationships cannot be underestimated. ECSE teachers see their role not just as educators but as partners with their students and parents in ensuring success and growth.

Theme 3: Success Builds Confidence for Retention. The interviews highlighted that ECSE teachers need success to build confidence for retention. This theme was mentioned a total of 53 times by all 12 of the participants who were interviewed. The ECSE teachers expressed a deep connection to their careers and how their efforts influenced the lives of their students and families. P1 stated, "What I enjoy the most about teaching ECSE is the excitement that students show when they are successful." P10 stated, "You see that growth so much quicker than you do with some of the older kiddos, and they love learning, even when it's hard." P11 stated, "Seeing that student grow educationally and also just in their personality grow, and then just watching that child change over time socially within the classroom." All the participants who were interviewed emphasized the importance of early interventions and how this gave teachers a sense of accomplishment, encouraging them to stay in the profession. P12 stated, "When children get early interventions to address their needs, their skills can skyrocket, and I love to learn with my students and celebrate their accomplishments." P7 stated, "I love the eureka when they, you know, figure something out. Their love and excitement for anything new, and they want that

relationship with you. They're fun." P3 stated, "They're happy to learn through music, and they're happy to learn through science."

One of the interview questions asked the teachers why they stayed in the profession and asked for five reasons. This question was meant to evoke self-exploration and allow the teachers to reflect on their past success. Many of the teachers stated that self-reflection and collaboration with other teachers were critical to their success and retention in the profession. All of the participants interviewed stated that they either loved their profession or were meant to be teachers. P1 stated many words to describe teacher success, which included words such as joy, uplifting support, confident, and make a difference. P10 had references which included the words, love, helping, fun to celebrate, and "I absolutely love teaching." P11 had references which included the quote, "I have always wanted to be a teacher my whole life", other positive words such as enjoy teaching, and "I loved, you know, figuring out what they needed to be able to be successful." P12 stated, "I do not want to abandon them. I feel like I am serving a higher purpose by bettering my community, and I love to learn with my students and celebrate their accomplishments." P3 stated, "I always look forward to my day. I always had a lot of fun working with them the most because I was able to make whatever we were doing fun." Each of the teachers reflected highlights and success as a pivotal reason for staying in the ECSE profession. Their reflections revealed a shared calling for many of ECSE teachers and an understanding to a committed profession.

RQ2

What are experienced early childhood special education teachers' perspectives on supports needed for novice teachers to stay in the field?

Table 4*Themes Developed Regarding RQ2*

Theme	Number of times each theme was addressed by participants	Number of participants who addressed the theme
Theme 4: ECSE teachers require great teams	101	12
Theme 5: Parents and community collaboration are essential	24	12
Theme 6: ECSE teachers require substantial education and training	77	12

Theme 4: ECSE Teachers Require Great Teams. The interviews highlighted how ECSE teachers require guidance from their administrators, mentors, and members of their educational teams to be successful. This theme was mentioned a total of 101 times by all 12 of the participants who were interviewed. Below are the findings that emerged, making them significant in order to answer the research questions. The majority of the ECSE teachers interviewed needed the principal to support them when there were issues with student behavior and care. Other principals and coordinators encouraged support staff to become ECSE teachers and supported their journeys to their professions. P3 stated, “I had an excellent coordinator who really was very instrumental in helping me become a better teacher.” P5 stated, “My building administrator was one of my biggest advocates; they found ways to help support me and make it work.” P6 stated, “I was teaching kids with mild to moderate disabilities, and my principal was very supportive of that.” P7 stated, “My principal was so supportive. You know, I could see behaviors that needed adjusting, and whatever it was that I could see, he backed me up.” Teacher mentoring played a large factor in teacher retention for the interviewees. Many of the participants who were interviewed were fortunate enough to receive mentoring early on, and later, when they

changed roles in education or positions in a new district. P12 stated, “I did have a mentor my first year, she was a very experienced preschool teacher.” P2 had an unofficial mentor and stated, “I had her for two weeks as a mentor, and so I was easily able to slip into that position when it was time to take over.” P7 stated, “I’ve gone to the peer mentoring program that we had, the best mentoring program, and they teach you how to talk to people and ask them questions and get them to come up with what they want to do.” P8 stated, “I would say that mentoring and having that relationship is key to keeping special education teachers.” P9 stated that mentorship was huge to their success and retention in the profession.

Paraeducators, specialists, and additional school staff were a significant factor during the interviews. Five of the teachers noted that they needed staff support more than administrative support to be successful. The interview data revealed that ECSE teachers were able to receive critical advice and support from their peers within their schools to succeed and remain in their positions. P9 stated, “One of those teachers spent 20 hours with me one weekend, and I think without her, I would never have made it.” P8 stated, “You really need to feel like we have that team, you know, team collaborative.” P7 stated, “Definitely our peers, other teachers, if it wasn’t for them, I think I would have died. We all could support each other and come up with strategies to help each other.” P6 referred to staff support. They stated, “My paras were important, and having a team was really important to me.” The experiences stated by the ECSE teachers made it clear that effective guidance from the leaders and teammates left meaningful memories and avenues for the ECSE teachers need for support to stay in their profession for more than four years.

Theme 5: Parents and Community Collaboration are Essential. A strong and supportive partnership between parents and the surrounding community is essential for

promoting the growth and development of ECSE students. This theme was brought up over 24 times by 12 of the ECSE teachers interviewed. Positive parent and community support are a critical component for teacher success. P6 stated, “I had some families that I had been the case manager for their child from kindergarten through fifth grade, and I had these very strong relationships with them that I treasured, and you really get to know the families and get close with them, and you really are a team.” P4 was impressed with the parent support and interactions with the ECSE program and stated, “Phone calls, texts, face-to-face conversations, or journaling back and forth were several ways communication between home and school happened.” P3 stated, “You have the parents on your side, and they understand you and they agree with how you’re running things and how you’re dealing with their kids.” Another common theme mentioned in the interviews included that the community was a factor in teacher retention because of the outside support that was given through associations, which included developmental screenings, community events for the students, and extra funding. P1 stated, “The community would step in and provide developmental screenings for the early childhood students.” P6 noted “Lastly, the community collaboration, we have amazing volunteers at our school. All those people really enhanced the personal but also professional satisfaction.” P2 stated, “I work in a unique school, you know, with the community and some of them I’ve had as students myself.” The overall importance of parent and community support was a valuable strength for these teachers. The significance of these positive supports allowed the ECSE teachers to remain in their careers for more than four years.

Theme 6: ECSE Teachers Require Substantial Education and Training. A recurring theme that emerged from the interview data was that ECSE teachers need substantial education and training to maintain a high level of success. The theme was mentioned a total of 77 times by

all 12 of the participants who were interviewed. The participants interviewed stated that the initial classes in college paved a foundation for their future success as an ECSE teacher. The majority of the teachers stated that they took classes in writing IEPs, the law, behavior, and child development. P1 stated that “Theory to inclusion, law, and behavior management was helpful.” P2 stated, “The class that I remember most was called Special Education and the law.” P3 stated, “So one of the most important classes was a class in Piaget and theory, and classes that worked on behavior, those were always important.” P11 stated, “So we went through a class that used art to actually teach concepts like circle, curve line, wave line, things to distinguish things for children to learn how to distinguish things to be able to write letters.” Each of the ECSE teachers reported that they were required to take classes after their initial certification to maintain their credentials. All of the participants noted that they had annual training that was required by their respective districts. Collaboration and professional development were spoken of throughout the interviews. Eleven of the participants acknowledged that they learned many key resources through professional development and the classes were critical to maintain teaching strategies and provide essential new practices. P12 received yearly Right Response training to help with student behaviors and de-escalations. P2 stated, “I had trainings along the way for how to work with young children, TS Gold, the teaching strategies gold, SEL, and curriculum support.” P3 stated “I was sent by the Bureau of Indian Affairs on fetal alcohol and its effects, classes on ADD and ADHD kids, dyslexia, and areas of positive behavior supports.” P4 stated that “My National Board for Professional Teaching was helpful since it provided excellent strategies to develop student’s knowledge and the collaboration with other teachers in the program was needed to support my continued career.” P5 stated, “I took some classes through the office of superintendent for public instruction for behavioral disorders.” All of the teachers noted that

without yearly trainings and professional development through the school, they would not feel supported to maintain the knowledge needed to educate the ECSE population. The significance of these positive supports allowed the ECSE teachers to remain in their careers for more than four years.

Evaluation of the Outcomes

This section contains an evaluation of the outcomes of this study based on each research question and the current research that supports the findings. The exploratory case study was most appropriate since it involved detailed information from the ECSE teachers that were relevant to answering the research questions.

Research Question 1

RQ1 was devised to understand experienced teachers' perspectives on why they had stayed in the ECSE field. The participant responses yielded three themes: Multiple avenues of practice for successful teaching, positive relationships increase growth, and success builds confidence for retention. The participants reported a variety of reasons why ECSE teachers have stayed in the profession, including personal growth, working on a team, the love of teaching, their positive experiences, personal commitment, and achieving teacher success through student growth. The perspectives of the study participants were similar to the findings of Buchanan and Mooney (2023), ECSE teachers stayed in the profession which organized their research around moments of success which led to teacher retention. The study noted moments of success through supporting students and enjoying the growth they made. The study participants' responses were aligned with Walter et al. (2022), ECSE teachers stayed in the profession when they sensed well-being in their profession, success with their students, positive relationships with parents, a love for teaching, learning best practice standards, and strength from their peers. According to the

findings in this study, ECSE teachers experienced personal well-being which resulted in 77.8% staying in the field and of those who felt fulfilled resulted with 88.5% satisfaction and wanted to stay in the ECSE field. The findings from research question one from the ECSE teacher interviews were full of descriptive data which gave multiple perspectives on why they stayed in the ECSE field. The experienced ECSE teachers' findings directly relate to the stated purpose of the study which was to understand experienced ECSE teachers' strategies to reduce attrition.

Research Question 2

The purpose of research question two was to understand experienced ECSE teachers' perspectives on the support needed to keep ECSE teachers working for more than four years. The responses of the study generated three themes: ECSE teachers require great teams, parents and community collaboration are essential, and ECSE teachers need substantial education and training. There were multiple supports indicated from all of the study participants. According to the findings, the participant's affirmed the importance of supports and education needed to achieve success in their field. As with research question one, Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism (Creswell & Poth, 2018) is a helpful lens in examining how experienced ECSE teachers learn through professional development, college education, and support from their administrators, colleagues, parents and community. Past research have confirmed that effective supports and education are needed to succeed as a ECSE teacher. The responses of the studies participants reflected the findings of Flores and Shuls (2024), stated that teacher retention was possible with five factors which included a supportive administration, strong professional development, mentoring programs, classroom autonomy, and a positive school culture. Further finding from the study indicated that school buildings with these five factors have a teacher average experience range from 12-18 years. The ranking from the study indicated that a

supportive administration and positive school culture were the top two out of five reasons for the retention. The data from this study's findings indicated the need for a strong professional development program which aligns with the study from McLeod et al. (2021) indicated that ECSE teachers require special knowledge and continued trainings for the successful application of their specialty. The study further signified that ECSE teachers require many hours of evidence-based practice to accurately identify critical interventions to be a primary focus for implementation and positive results. Additional findings from the study aligned with the participants data that included college coursework that emerged as a strength for the ECSE field. Additional alignment from the respondent's data came from recent research from Tomkins (2023) whose study focused on the practice for retention strategies which showed a formula for retention that included a focus on academic success, social growth, parental inclusion and a positive school culture. The study continued to note that teachers need to be prepared academically, have an internship with continued mentoring, good workplace conditions, and administrative support. The findings from research question two identified what supports are needed to retain ECSE teachers and address the purpose of the study, which is to understand experienced ECSE teachers' strategies to reduce attrition.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

The first recommendation for practice is during the first year of hire, which is to provide mentorship with either an experienced team of ECSE teachers or one highly experienced ECSE teacher that can focus on classroom management, IEP writing, implementation, and behavior strategies. After the first year, a continued mentorship of ECSE teacher peers are needed for continued guidance for at least the next two additional years. The findings from the study

indicated that quality mentorship is key for first year ECSE teachers that goes beyond the student teacher experience (Buchanan & Mooney, 2023; Flores & Shuls, 2024; LaCroix et al., 2023).

The second recommendation for practice is to provide administrative support and guidance to ensure that their reviews have worthy recommendations with a clear pathway to success and to provide a positive team culture that includes team member and parent support. The administrator should be a supportive partner that guides the new ECSE teacher and gives positive experience with practical expectations. The findings from the study indicated that support with their team, parents, and administration was key to their success. The participants responses additionally aligned with Walter et al. (2022), ECSE teachers stayed in the profession when they sense well-being in their profession, success with their students, positive relationships with parents, a love for teaching, learning best practice standards, and strength from their peers.

The third recommendation is to provide ECSE professional development that is relevant for the specialty with implementation strategies and practice. The data from this study's findings indicated the need for a strong professional development program which aligns with the study from McLeod et al. (2021) which indicated that ECSE teachers require special knowledge and continued trainings for the successful application of their specialty. Additional alignment from the respondent's data came from recent research from Tomkins (2023) whose study focused on the practice for retention strategies which showed a formula for retention that included a focus on academic success, social growth, parental inclusion and a positive school culture. The study continued to note that teachers need to be prepared academically, have an internship with continued mentoring, good workplace conditions, and administrative support. Kmail and Brobbey (2024) noted that PD needs to be relevant for the special education teacher's practice

such as precise training for students with Autism or behavior strategies that align with everyday needs in the classroom.

Recommendations for Future Research

The first recommendation is replicating the study using a larger and more diverse sample of ECSE teachers in the United States. A larger sample may provide an increase of varied data from ECSE teachers, thus possible different perspectives. Although data saturation was accomplished, the participants were from a small geographic area. When replicating this study in a different geographical area, additional cultural influence may give rise to additional findings. The second recommendation for future research is to use a mixed methods approach when expanding on this study with an extended questionnaire that reveals scaled responses which will provide a more concise numerical data comparison. Although this recommendation would be tedious for a single researcher, a team of two or more may be able to accomplish such research. ECSE teachers need support and more information. Future studies being conducted must be shared with stakeholders to enhance their understanding of the supports needed to retain their ECSE teachers. Stakeholders require an abundance of data to justify additional spending with training and recruitment of new ECSE teachers. The third recommendation is to expand on a theme of interest from the study such as, relevant professional development, and apply an in-depth analysis on how or why a recommended support was so valuable to ECSE teachers' retention. According to the participants, any of the specialized training they received was highly useful working with ECSE students.

Conclusions

The problem addressed in this qualitative exploratory case study was the high attrition rate in ECSE teachers (Yates, 2025). The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was

to understand experienced ECSE teachers' strategies to reduce attrition. Through 12 participants interviews, the study emerged with six themes from the interview findings. The study answered two research questions directly related to the purpose of this study. Research question one: What are experienced early childhood special education teachers' perspectives on why they have stayed in their profession? Research question one was devised to understand experienced teachers' perspectives on why they had stayed in the ECSE field. The participant responses yielded three themes: Multiple avenues of practice for successful teaching, positive relationships increase growth, and success builds confidence for retention. The perspectives of the study participants were similar to the findings from Buchanan and Mooney (2023) and Walter et al., (2022). Research question two: What are experienced early childhood special education teachers' perspectives on supports needed for novice teachers to stay in the field? Research question two was developed to understand experienced ECSE teachers' perspectives on the support needed to keep ECSE teachers working for more than four years. The responses of the study generated three themes: ECSE teachers require great teams, parents and community collaboration are essential, and ECSE teachers need substantial education and training. The perspectives of the study participants were similar to the findings from Flores and Shuls (2024), McLeod et al., (2021), and Tompkins (2023). Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism (Creswell & Poth, 2018) is a useful lens to examine experienced ECSE teachers' perspectives and how their views on success and support is needed to increase teacher retention. The theoretical implication of this study as related to Vygotsky's theory is that experienced ECSE teachers offer valuable information for future teachers and administrators to learn and benefit through collaboration. The findings of this study answered both research questions and addressed specific supports and reasons why ECSE teachers have stayed in the field for four or more years.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Recruitment Letter

My name is Virginia Holderith, and I am a doctoral student at National University. I am conducting a research study to help identify strategies to increase early childhood special education teacher retention.

I am recruiting individuals who meet all of these criteria:

1. You are a certified early childhood special education teacher (ECSE).
2. You have remained employed as an ECSE teacher for more than 3 years or have retired from the position with 4 or more years in the field.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following activities:

1. You will be asked to provide your credentials and proof of years on the job.
2. You will be asked to participate in an in-person or online interview platform such as Zoom or MS TEAMS.

During these activities, you will be asked questions about:

1. Your years of experience.
2. Questions about your positive experiences and supports.
3. Questions about why you stayed on the job.

Those who participate will receive a gift card for \$5.00 from either Starbucks or Dunkin Donuts.

Please contact me via email at V.Holderith1424@o365.ncu.edu

Thank you for considering participating in this voluntary research!
Virginia Holderith

Appendix B
Demographic Questionnaire

1. State your name and current profession.
2. What year did you receive your initial degree as an early childhood teacher?
3. What year did you receive your degree as a special education teacher?
4. What year did you receive your certification/s?
5. How many years have you worked in your current job?
6. How many years have you worked in your previous job?
7. How many previous ESCE teaching positions have you held?
8. Are you currently working in the ECSE field or are you working in a different position?

Appendix C

Revised Interview Questions

1. State your name and current place of employment.
2. Describe the key classes in college that prepared you for teaching ECSE.
3. Describe in detail the key support you received from your administration teams (building, special education, early childhood).
4. Describe in detail if you received mentor or peer support and how that helped you.
5. Describe in detail what you enjoy/enjoyed about teaching early childhood special education.
6. Given the fact that you are/were an early childhood special education teacher, what are the top five reasons that kept you in the profession?

Appendix D

Initial Interview Questions

1. State your name and profession including your years of experience and your current status of employment.
2. Describe the responsibilities of an ECSE teacher and how they differ from a typical special education teacher.
3. Describe in detail the differences between an ECSE teacher to a general education teacher.
4. Describe the key classes in college that prepared you for teaching in early childhood and special education.
5. Describe in detail the key support you received from your administration.
6. Describe in detail if you received mentor and or peer support and how that helped you.
7. Describe in detail what you enjoy/enjoyed about teaching early childhood special education.
8. Given the fact that you are/were an early childhood special education teacher, what are the top five reasons that kept you in the profession?

Appendix E
Examples of Codes

Code	Number of times/participants	Participant	Excerpt
Practice	28/12	P1	“It is a best practice standard to deliver special education to delayed early childhood students.”
Standards	5/5	P4	“My professional teaching standards in exceptional needs were valuable.”
Techniques	16/12	P3	“If this technique didn’t work, then another one would.”
Strategies	5/5	P7	“To teach your ideas, your strategies, and others come to you for guidance.”
Experience	35/12	P2	“A success in the beginning of their educational journey sets the stage for positive learning mindsets.”
Love	39/12	P8	“Here’s the thing, I just love kids.”
Communication	27/12	P3	” Weekly parent communication was needed and helpful.”
Relationships	31/12	P5	“Supporting parents and guiding parents are goals.”
IEP Team	47/12	P12	“It’s important to have a cohesive IEP team. It’s a key factor for the student.”
Success	12/12	P4	“Success with a student filled my bucket.”

Accomplishments	6/6	P5	“It’s amazing how much they can accomplish when we don’t put limits on our students.”
Mentors	16/12	P6	“We would go to monthly meeting with other adjustment teachers. That was very beneficial to have those mentors.”
Principals	26/12	P7	“I ended up taking an elementary job and my principal was so supportive. You know, I could see behaviors that needed adjusting and whatever it was that I could see, he backed me up. “
Teachers	59/12	P8	“Having that relationship is key to keeping special education teachers in that side of positions. You really need to feel like we have that team, you know, team collaborative.”
Parents	12/12	P12	“When the parents have your back and support you, it means everything.”
Community	12/12	P10	“We also have support from the community with developmental screenings.
Base education	60/12	P11	“There were a lot of special-ed specific classes. There was

			actually one class that taught us how to write IEP's, which was very, very helpful."
Post education	17/12	P12	"I was sent by the BIE for behavior classes. They were very helpful."
Students	32/12	P1	"Seeing that student grow educationally and also just in their personality grow, and then just watching that child change over time socially within the classroom."