

**Supporting Special Education teachers in High-Needs Classrooms:  
A Qualitative Descriptive Case Study**

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## **Abstract**

Students with high-needs disabilities are increasing across the country, especially children diagnosed with autism. The problem addressed in this study was that, because of a focus on IDEA mandates, Special Education teachers in K-12 urban public-school districts are often required to teach high-needs students without sufficient instructional and administrative support, which negatively impacts student achievement. The purpose of this study was to understand Special Education teachers' perspectives on the instructional and administrative support needed for high-needs students to succeed, as well as administrators' perspectives on the resources required to support teachers in high-needs classrooms effectively. The conceptual theory examined in this study was Billingsley's four themes for special educators' retention and attrition, which focus on staffing shortages, recruitment, and attrition, issues that concern policymakers and school districts. A qualitative descriptive case study was used in this research study. The setting for this study was a western New York public school district, one of the state's largest. The sample consisted of nine Special Education teachers and ten building-level administrators. Data collection involved three components: Special Education teachers participated in individual interviews and a focus group, while building-level administrators completed an online questionnaire. The data collected were coded using Quirkos, an online data analysis tool, and analyzed using the six-phase thematic analysis process. The findings suggest that both Special Education teachers and administrators need additional guidance and support from their administrators to problem-solve and provide the best possible educational experience and opportunities for students, despite their uniqueness and challenges.

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As Walt Disney said, "All of our dreams can come true if we dare to pursue them."

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## Section 1: Foundation

High-needs students, such as those diagnosed with Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), are one of the fastest-growing neurodevelopmental disorders in the United States today (Young et al., 2023). In 2020, one in 36 children who were 8 years old (approximately 4% of boys and 1% of girls) were estimated to have been diagnosed with ASD. These estimates are higher than those from previous years, 2000 and 2018. In 2000, one in 150 children aged eight was diagnosed with autism, and in 2018, one in 44 was diagnosed with ASD (Maenner, 2023). Therefore, ASD diagnoses continue to rise, along with the implementation of special education mandates such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Yell and Bradley (2024), and school administrators need to provide support to Special Education teachers working in high-needs classrooms.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2024), the number of students with high-level disabilities is increasing nationwide. There were 6.4 million students aged 3-21 who qualified under IDEA to receive special education services in the United States during the 2012-2013 school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). The number of students increased to 7.5 million during the 2022–2023 school year. During this time frame, the most significant reported disabilities were specific learning disabilities, 32%, Speech/language impairment, 19%, other health impairments, and ASD was 13%. The trajectory for students with disabilities is expected to continue to rise. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

ASD is characterized as a developmental disability that includes difficulties in social interactions and often presents with repetitive patterns of behaviors, interests, or activities, which usually lead to problems in social interactions, communication, and participation in daily activities (Maenner, 2023). Autism spectrum disorder was once considered to be a rare diagnosis,

but it is now one of the most frequently diagnosed neurological disorders affecting children today (Maenner, 2023). Like other developmental, communicative, and behavioral delays, there are varying degrees and levels of functioning. There is no generic picture of what a child with autism is like, and it presents differently for everyone. Students diagnosed with autism have various abilities and difficulties, which is why it can be challenging to identify and provide adequate support (Maenner, 2023). Individuals who are identified with autism are diagnosed on a scale system using the DSM-5-TR diagnostic guidelines: Level 1, Level 2, and Level 3. It is based on the amount of support a person requires to function (Autism Speaks, 2021). Some students possess strong verbal skills, while others are non-verbal and require alternative communication methods. Then, other students present themselves with intellectual disabilities and require daily life skills and social skills training. On the other end of the scale are individuals with autism who are communicative and have high IQs. The differences between those with autism range from the level of services and the strategies students need to succeed in the classroom (Leblanc, 2009; Salari et al., 2022).

The prevalence of students with disabilities, particularly those with high-needs such as ASD, behavioral disorders, and communication impairments, continues to increase in school districts across the United States (Maenner et al., 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2022). According to the National Center for Statistics, during the 2022–23 school year, the number of students with disabilities reached a high of 7.5 million, resulting in a three percent increase in the number of students with disabilities from the 2019–2020 school year, despite overall decreases in student enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Despite the increase in the number of students with high-needs disabilities, these students require appropriate education and services to be provided. K-12 urban school districts continue to search for teachers and staff with

the knowledge and expertise to address this growing need. The demographic shift necessitates enhanced preparation and ongoing support for educators, particularly new educators, to ensure their effectiveness and retention in the classroom (Tristani & Bassett-Gunter, 2020).

The work of a teacher, especially a Special Education teacher, can be both challenging and rewarding. Special Education teachers are the strategists who design instruction to meet the unique needs of their students. The role of a Special Education teacher is to provide specialized, intensive instruction tailored to the unique needs of students with disabilities, ensuring that their academic success and legal rights are met (Billingsley et al., 2020). Paraprofessionals, general education teachers, related service providers, and, most importantly, administrators and leaders need to understand how to support students of all abilities. Classrooms do not exist in isolation; they are contained within the four walls, and it takes the larger school community to support and educate all students (Billingsley et al., 2020). Administrators, teachers, and support staff possess distinct knowledge bases and belief systems for educating students; therefore, educators often need to think creatively to achieve results in unique educational settings (Han & Cumming, 2022). Even the most knowledgeable and resourceful educators need support and ideas to work effectively with students and their families daily.

There is an overarching concern about the highly anticipated teacher shortage and where the staff will be recruited from to instruct the growing population of students with high-needs in the future. It is harder to find Special Education teachers due to the increase in students with high-needs disabilities. According to Tristani and Bassett-Gunter (2020), the demands and pressures placed on teachers are increasing despite the ever-changing nature of their job descriptions. Teachers, especially Special Education teachers, serve as mentors, behavior specialists, counselors, data experts, job coaches, and subject matter experts in the courses they

teach. In addition, the expectations from districts and schools are that students' progress on state tests. Once teachers are certified and in the classroom, it is reported that they find it difficult to access specific training to support working with students with ASD. Hamrick et al. (2021) discussed the need for 70% of the training to include individual training, coaching, and teacher feedback. Walker et al. (2024) further argued that their findings indicated a lack of training for Special Education teachers. Special Education teachers often lack the resources, knowledge, and skill sets to implement systematic instruction programs effectively and do not receive training before entering the classroom (Gilmour et al., 2024).

Educators, particularly administrators, are responsible for ensuring the safety, academic achievements, and overall well-being of both students and staff. Listening to teachers and other staff who work daily with students can help clarify what is working and what is not in the classroom, as well as how to improve the environment for both students and teachers (O'Handley et al., 2022). These issues, including the increasing needs of students, gaps in teacher preparation, and inadequate administrative support structures, present compelling questions for educational research. Currently, the literature suggests that creative approaches to teacher development and support may be necessary to address the changing school landscape (O'Handley et al., 2022). School districts are faced with the challenges of continuing to serve growing populations of students with complex needs, such as Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and behavioral difficulties (Maenner, 2023; Stark & Kosloski, 2022). Current studies have not addressed what administrators need to support Special Education teachers. Administrators would benefit from professional development on strategies to help students, teachers, and families. Administrators have numerous responsibilities, including identifying ways to integrate high-

needs Special Education teachers' content into classrooms (O'Handley et al., 2022; Jackson & Parker, 2023; Stark & Kosloski, 2022).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem addressed in this study was that, due to a focus on IDEA mandates, Special Education teachers in K-12 urban public-school districts are often required to teach high-needs students without sufficient instructional and administrative support, which negatively impacts student achievement (Shaheen & Bacher-Hicks, 2024). Special Education teachers spend only 32.4% of their day providing instruction (Gilmour et al., 2024). The remainder of their day is spent developing strategies, tracking progress toward students' goals, coordinating related services, supporting paraprofessionals, and providing consultative support to other staff members who support students with disabilities (Gilmour et al., 2024). Gilmour and Sandilos (2023) reported on a survey of 171 Special Education teachers, which found that administrator support directly influenced teachers' decisions to remain in the teaching field. Special Education teachers often feel unsupported due to the insufficient instructional and administrative support they receive (Shaheen & Bacher-Hicks, 2024).

K-12 urban Title 1 districts often face challenges such as poverty, segregation, high student turnover, limited access to resources, and achievement gaps (Billingsley et al., 2020). According to Gilmour and Sandilos (2023), the high turnover of Special Education teachers can be attributed to their greater likelihood of encountering challenges and leaving the profession at higher rates than other teachers, which negatively impacts student achievement. Students in schools with high turnover are at an educational disadvantage due to inexperienced and uncertified teachers, inconsistent instruction, and barriers to instructional growth and collaboration (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). To ensure equitable services for

high-needs students with disabilities, further research is needed to understand Special Education teachers' and administrators' perceptions of barriers to collaboration and the creation of a culture of belonging. If the problem is not addressed, and Special Education teachers in K-12 urban school districts are without adequate administrative and instructional support, students with high-need disabilities will continue to falter in their academic achievements.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand Special Education teachers' perspectives on the instructional and administrative support needed for high-needs students to succeed, as well as administrators' perspectives on the resources required to support teachers in high-needs classrooms effectively. Special Education teachers are often overworked and left to fend for themselves in K-12 urban school districts, with administrators unsure how to support them. Most administrators want to help and support, but many factors present challenges and barriers to providing adequate instructional and administrative support to Special Education teachers. This qualitative descriptive case study was conducted in a K-12 urban Title 1 school district in New York State. The target population consisted of K-12 Special Education teachers with experience working in high-needs classrooms within one public school district, as well as administrators who work in over 40 school buildings throughout the district. The district in which the study took place is an economically disadvantaged area and is federally defined as a Title I school district, receiving federal funding and support for nearly 31,000 students. Of these students, 7,000 are identified as students with a disability, and 26,000 students are economically disadvantaged. The school district used for this study has approximately 745 K-12 Special Education teachers, 285 principals, and assistant principals. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. Participants were recruited through the special education department's email

list of Special Education teachers. The sample for this study comprised 19 participants: nine Special Education teachers and ten building-level administrators. The Special Education teachers were individually interviewed and then invited to participate in a focus group session. The building-level administrators were asked to complete a questionnaire on this topic. The sample size was determined to achieve data saturation, given the district's size (Doyle et al., 2020). It was determined that this method supports recruiting participants who can provide detailed, rich data (Campbell, 2020). Data collection was completed through semi-structured individual interviews and a focus group. The interview protocols are found in the Appendices (C and D). The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, which involves a structured method for identifying codes, categories, and themes based on similarities within the data. Through the research process, analyzing the data will help identify best practices for administrators to support Special Education teachers, which is critical to understanding how to remedy the problem.

## **Research Questions**

### ***RQ1***

What are Special Education teachers' perspectives on instructional supports needed for high-needs students to succeed?

### ***RQ2***

What are Special Education teachers' perspectives on how administrators can provide resources to support teachers in high-needs classrooms?

### ***RQ3***

What are administrators' perspectives on what resources they need to effectively support teachers in high-needs classrooms?

## **Conceptual Framework**

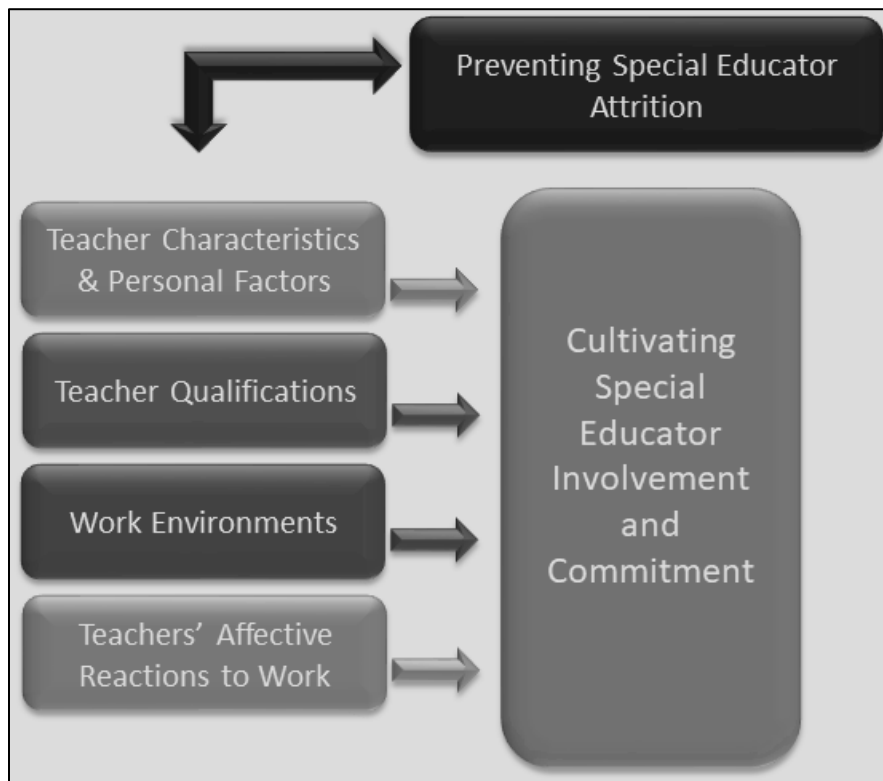
Conceptual frameworks are a critical component of the qualitative research process, as they provide the conceptual background or structure of the research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). In essence, it is a synthesis of the concepts or model of examining a problem through a different lens, providing an understanding of a phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). A conceptual framework was employed to provide insight and guide the research process for this qualitative, descriptive case study. The conceptual theory examined for this study was Billingsley's four themes for special educators' retention and attrition. There are many challenges in special education today; one of the most critical topics is developing qualified teachers and creating environments that foster their growth and development into highly skilled educators. Issues related to staffing shortages, recruitment, and attrition concern policymakers and school districts (Billingsley, 2004). Billingsley (2004) contributed four significant themes that comprise the conceptual framework, encompassing special educators' retention and attrition. Billingsley (2004) utilizes a thematic analysis of special education attrition and retention studies to develop her conceptual framework. The four major themes addressed are teacher characteristics and personal factors, teacher qualifications, work environments, and the teachers' affective reactions towards work. These themes work together to illustrate their interconnectedness to this problem.

Through Billingsley's (2004) explanation of the conceptual framework, it connects to the root of the problem—attrition and retention difficulties—and outlines how to address them. The first tenet, teacher and student characteristics, focuses on the strategies and support needed for teachers to succeed in the classroom. The second tenet focuses on teacher qualifications and their impact on teacher retention, including ways in which districts can support Special Education teachers. The third tenet discussed the work environment and its contribution to the retention and

attrition of Special Education teachers. The final tenet from Billingsley (2004) explains teachers' affective reactions to work. This is how Special Education teachers often perceive their work: negative feelings, stress, and a lack of support and resources. Refer to Figure 1, which illustrates this conceptual framework as outlined by Billingsley (2004).

**Figure 1**

*Billingsley's Four Themes for Special Educators' Retention and Attrition*



Billingsley (2004) discussed research that informed the development of this conceptual framework, focusing on factors that influence Special Education teachers' decisions to remain in the education field. There has been, and continues to be, concern about teacher retention, especially in special education classrooms. The benefit of this conceptual framework is that it is timeless, as it was designed in 2004. These same areas of concern remain highly relevant to today's Special Education teachers and the issues they face in the classroom. Several complex

factors influenced the emphasis on supply and demand for Special Education teachers. Due to staffing shortages, districts have had to reduce services and increase class sizes. These shortages lead to unjust educational opportunities, decreased student achievement, and uncertified classroom teachers. The problem is not only staffing shortages but also attrition. Teachers in special education, math, and science have the highest teacher turnover (Billingsley, 2004). Billingsley (2004) stated that many Special Education teachers transfer to general education roles, while others leave due to working conditions. Billingsley's framework is well developed and encompasses many factors that can lead to attrition. These four areas — teacher characteristics and personal factors, teacher qualifications, work environment, and teacher affective reactions to work — can help explain how teachers feel supported and successful in the classroom despite the challenges they face. The strength of this conceptual framework lies in its breadth, which allows it to adapt to changing times. A challenge with this framework was when a new theme associated with attrition and retention emerged, and determining whether it fit.

Another theory considered for this study was Gary Hornby's (2015) work on inclusion in special education. His theory focused on inclusive philosophy and practices that use interventions, strategies, and procedures to address needs in special education (Hornby, 2015). In addition, his theory centered on the idea that special education students should be exposed to the same curriculum and standards and work toward the same achievement goals as their peers while preparing them to live and function in the real world. Separate classrooms do not exist in the community; everyone coexists and works together (Hornby, 2015; Hornby, 2021). Hornby's view encompasses the values, beliefs, and practices employed to support students' success in the classroom.

In addition, within the conceptual framework of this study, John Dewey's educational theory helps capture what may be connected to the problem and how leaders can support teachers in high-needs classrooms. His work in education laid the foundation for the educational practices that are in place today. Dewey (1877) stated in his pedagogic creed that when teachers are engaged in their students' learning, they support life training, such as preparing students for the future. Special education teachers focus on transition goals and career exploration. Teaching goes way beyond a textbook. Dewey set high expectations and established a framework for education, which remains in place today. Many schools of education still reference and use their philosophy of educational practice. The challenge with this theory is that it does not explicitly address attrition among Special Education teachers.

After examining these three models and theories in terms of their philosophy, background, values, and practices, the one that best supports the research questions is Billingsley's (2004). Billingsley's (2004) model, which identifies four themes related to special education retention or attrition rates, helps address the issues pertinent to this study, focusing on Special Education teacher characteristics, teacher qualifications, work environments, and their affective reactions to their work. The experiences in high-needs classrooms depend on Special Education teachers' philosophies, beliefs, motivation, values, and practices, which shape their perceptions (Hornby, 2015).

## **Definitions of Key Terms**

### ***Accommodation***

Adjustments teachers make to the environment, instruction, or instructional materials, such as large print, to enable students to access the content. These do not change what is being

taught; they help students access the content alongside their peers. (Continuum of Special Education Services for School-Age Students with Disabilities, n.d.).

### ***Administrators***

Administrators and school leaders are school- or district-level leaders who oversee teachers, staff, and students, as well as the day-to-day operations of the school or district. They are responsible for safety, instructional growth, behavioral issues, human resource matters, and other related matters (Gilmour & Sandilos, 2023).

### ***Autism spectrum disorder (ASD)***

ASD is a condition that is based on a DSM-IV diagnosis on a continuum that is characterized by severe and pervasive impairments in social interactions, communication, and repetitive behaviors and activities (Martínez-Pedraza & Carter, 2009).

### ***High Leverage Practices (HLP)***

High-leverage practices are teaching methods and strategies that support special education students in the classroom (Tristani, 2020).

### ***Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)***

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) states that individual states and school districts are responsible for identifying students from birth to age 21 who are suspected of having a disability. The act includes regulations on evaluating, reporting, and measuring racial/ethnic differences among individuals with disabilities (Lai et al., 2024).

### ***Inclusive Education (IE)***

Inclusive education (IE) is a teaching practice that supports diverse learning needs in the general education setting (Tristani, 2020).

### ***Interventions***

Interventions are strategies and support developed to target students' difficulties and are typically delivered to individual students (Morris et al., 2021).

### ***Least Restrictive Setting (LRE)***

The least restrictive setting (LRE) identifies the setting that best meets the educational needs of a student with a disability (Continuum of Special Education Services for School-Age Students with Disabilities, n.d.).

### ***Modifications***

Modifications refer to changes in the curriculum or the measurement of learning, such as a different grading method or an altered assignment (Continuum of Special Education Services for School-Age Students with Disabilities, n.d.).

### ***Special Class***

A special class is a designation for a class comprising students with disabilities who have been grouped because of their similar needs. Students are educated separately from their peers (Continuum of Special Education Services for School-Age Students with Disabilities, n.d.).

### ***Special Education***

Special education describes the educational services that support students through specially designed lessons, services, and transportation to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities (Gill, 2013).

### ***Students with Disabilities (SWD)***

Students with disabilities are learners with needs that limit their ability to participate fully in the general education setting (Tristani, 2020).

## **Review of the Literature**

The purpose of this study was to understand Special Education teachers' perspectives on the instructional and administrative support needed for high-needs students to succeed, as well as administrators' perspectives on the resources required to support teachers in high-needs classrooms effectively. The literature review will demonstrate the challenges Special Education teachers face, including the increase in high-needs students, the demands of the job, and the lack of administrative support.

The review of literature is organized into five main topics to discuss and share the available research on K-12 urban Special Education teachers and the issues related to administrator support and instructional resources. The first section describes policies related to special education, then proceeds to high-needs disabilities, with a focus on autism. The review of literature then transitioned into an examination of Special Education teachers and their evolving roles, culminating in an analysis of instructional support for teachers. The review of literature concludes with a section reviewing administrative support for Special Education teachers.

The review of the literature suggests that Special Education teachers encounter numerous challenges, particularly in high-needs classrooms, which are further exacerbated when they lack administrative support (Jackson & Parker, 2023). In addition, this review of the literature includes background information on ASD and the challenges that Special Education teachers face in high-needs classrooms, as well as reasons for their departure and suggestions for future research (Elliott et al., 2023).

During the literature review, I used various strategies to identify content and studies that best met the study's needs. While searching for peer-reviewed literature that supported the study, I accessed various academic library resources and scholarly databases, including the University's

online library and search engines such as EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, Sage Knowledgebase, and JSTOR. I used the Boolean search tool by entering various phrases and keywords throughout the research process. Some phrases and keywords were *Special Education teacher retention, students with Autism spectrum disorder, high-leverage practices, special education students, and professional development and training*. The searches were narrowed by limiting to full text, the last five years, and studies conducted in the United States, despite studies being performed in other parts of the world. As I collected the research studies, I prioritized ensuring that the articles and research reports were peer-reviewed, as stated by the journals' publishers. Older studies and articles were included to provide a foundation for conducting the study, establishing context and background information critical to this problem. The systematic research approach to the literature search led to the identification of various published, peer-reviewed studies, with a focus on utilizing articles that included relevant results, which can be used to examine generalizations and limitations, as well as exposing the current knowledge and gaps in the research, thereby justifying the purpose of the study.

### ***Special Education Policies***

Historically, there have been difficulties finding enough Special Education teachers to provide all students with the instruction and support needed for success (Bettini, 2024). Recently, shortages have sparked concern (Bettini, 2024). According to Gilmour et al. (2024), Special Education teacher vacancies have long been a concern and persist as a significant issue. Twenty-one percent of schools reported at least one vacancy in special education, and 55% reported it was challenging to fill Special Education teacher positions during the 2022-2023 school year (Gilmour et al., 2024). In addition to high turnover rates of Special Education teachers, about 15% leave their schools each year, along with the declining numbers of new Special Education

teachers graduating each year from teacher preparation programs, which continues to make it challenging for students with disabilities to access the services they need to succeed in school (Gilmour et al., 2024). A lack of access to consistent teachers can result in inadequate services for students. A 2024 United States Government Accountability Office report found that students with disabilities who did not receive special education services faced delays due to staffing challenges in special education (Gilmour et al., 2024). Additionally, Gilmour et al. (2024) reported that staffing limits the special education services students receive, thereby limiting what students can achieve in school. With the increased number of identified students and staffing difficulties, policies and practices have been reviewed to ensure students can achieve their goals.

Policies have been implemented to protect students with disabilities and ensure they receive the services they need. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 (Yell & Bradley, 2024). IDEA is the obligation of schools to provide a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) to students with disabilities, along with supporting students in the least restrictive environment (LRE), which is classroom support that meets each student's needs (Yell & Bradley, 2024).

The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of IDEA in the United States was in 2025, which required school districts to accurately identify students so they could receive the services they needed (Yell & Bradley, 2024). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires school districts to identify students appropriately so that they can receive the necessary services. The three main components of IDEA are to 1) identify and locate all children between the ages of birth and 21 who are suspected of having a disability; 2) evaluate and determine if they are eligible for services; and 3) ensure that racial and ethnic disparities are addressed through identification (Lai et al., 2024). The benefits of the IDEA policy were that all students could receive the support and

resources needed to succeed. IDEA provides nearly \$14 billion annually to states and school districts to help ensure that the work is carried out (Lai et al., 2024). The primary purpose of IDEA was to ensure that school districts provide free and appropriate public education (FAPE) to eligible students and to place each student in the least restrictive environment (LRE) based on their needs (Yell & Bradley, 2024). IDEA allows more than 7.5 million children nationwide to receive special education and related services (Lai et al., 2024). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has led to the widespread use of invention systems and kindergarten readiness tests. Districts must report the data collected, which is then used to track services, referrals, and successes. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 initiated the movement to determine whether students have a disability or whether their difficulties are due to ineffective instruction. Over the years, as IDEA has evolved, states have been granted flexibility in tracking progress and the categories being monitored using assessment tools. There has been a growth in the number of identified students with ASD and dyslexia; more work is needed in those areas (Lai et al., 2024). Developing and following policies and services is critical to ensuring that students receive what they need to achieve in the classroom.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has sent cases to the Supreme Court for determination. Yell and Bradley (2024) detail several Supreme Court cases that address the implementation of FAPE and LRE requirements and have led to changes in how districts provide student services. A Pennsylvania court recently ruled that staffing shortages were not grounds for failing to provide a FAPE (Gilmour et al., 2024). As a result, this case went to the Supreme Court due to an autistic child not receiving their services due to staffing shortages. Accordingly, Gilmour et al. (2024) reported that staffing shortages can reduce access to individualized instruction. Staffing shortages can also lead to other challenges, such as when

special teachers leave, taking their experience and knowledge with them, which can disrupt programming and goals in their positions. When teachers leave, they take their knowledge, training, and experience with them; changes can be complex, especially when a teacher leaves during the school year. Students may also be affected by the person who replaces the teacher who leaves, whether that person is experienced or a novice. Gilmour et al.'s (2024) findings reveal that Special Education teacher attrition leads to staffing challenges and reduces the effectiveness of the remaining educators, who must determine what was previously done to support students. The exact effect on students is unknown, as is the impact on the other staff in the building. Figuring out ways to reduce the long-standing shortage of Special Education teachers only helps students with disabilities reach their goals. According to Yell and Bradley (2024), court cases, policies, and guidance from the Department of Education make it clear that a district's primary duty is to meet each student's individual needs. Districts must determine FAPE based on the specific needs of a student with a disability, including ensuring that specially designed instruction (SDI) is provided in accordance with the services and support each student requires. The increase in the prevalence of students identified with autism and other high-needs diagnoses is leading to overburdening school districts regarding the ability to provide quality teachers, instruction, and support (Theobald et al., 2021).

### ***High-Needs Disabilities***

Students with high-needs include students with Autism spectrum disorders along with developmental, behavioral, and communicative disorders. The Centers for Disease Control estimates that autism today affects one in 36 children and one in 45 adults in the United States (Maenner, 2023). Educators of all ages should be aware of the characteristics of ASD, as the earlier individuals are diagnosed, the sooner support can be provided. Luongo et al.'s (2024)

study on early ASD diagnosis is helpful, as it supports the development of new and more effective tools for diagnosing ASD. There is no actual cause or cure for ASD currently; improving the diagnosis process for ASD is beneficial to the medical community, families, and educators. Hopefully, others investigating the identification of ASD continue to research and continue to push forward with the work to support families, children, and those working in the ASD community (Luongo et al., 2024). The intricacies of students with ASD and other high-need disabilities can lead to difficulties in the classroom, as there are individualized strategies and support that need to be utilized for students to achieve.

The number of students with disabilities continues to rise, according to The Annual Disabilities Statistics Compendium, released in 2024, which includes data on specific learning disabilities, speech impairments, and intellectual disabilities. In the fall of 2021, 6,871,121 people aged six to 21 received special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which equates to 10.1% of all students in the school-age range (Annual Disabilities Compendium, 2024). Of these, 2,346,150 were diagnosed with learning disabilities, 327,418 were diagnosed with emotional disturbance, and 827,791 individuals were identified as students with autism. The report continues to describe all the other disabilities and percentages. A more alarming statistic is that in 2022, of those who were identified with a disability over the age of 25, 33.6% had only a high school diploma and did not go on to further their education (Annual et al., 2024). The number of students with high-needs disabilities has been increasing in recent years, encompassing students with ASD, social-emotional disabilities, physical, intellectual, and communicative disabilities, along with other impairments. Autism continues to be one of the fastest-growing neurodevelopmental disorders in the United States today (Young et al., 2023). ASD encompasses a broad range of difficulties, including social skills, repetitive

behaviors, and speech delays. The Centers for Disease Control estimate that one in 31 (3.2%) children aged 8 are identified in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). Autism spectrum disorders were found to be 3.4 times more prevalent among boys than girls. It was also reported that ASD prevalence was lower among non-Hispanic white children (Shaw, 2025).

A challenging part of the ASD diagnosis is that there is not one concrete set of characteristics. Autism presents differently for every person who is diagnosed; some individuals are diagnosed as high functioning and can manage their daily living skills with strategies and some support. Others need intensive support, are non-verbal, and could have intellectual disabilities (Han et al., 2024). In the past, the term pervasive development (PDD) had been used when referring to autistic disorder, Asperger's disorder, PDD not otherwise specified, childhood disintegrative disorder, and Rett disorder (Martínez-Pedraza & Carter, 2009). Autism spectrum disorder behaviors are present on a continuum, where individuals are identified by severe and pervasive impairments that include social interactions and communication, and exhibit behaviors and restricted interests (Martínez-Pedraza & Carter, 2009). The U.S. Department of Health (2025) reported that pediatricians screen children for autism at 12 and 18 months and conduct additional screenings if there is a risk in the child's medical history. The report from the U.S. Department of Health (2025) suggested that increases in autism identification, especially from under-identified groups, prove that there is a need for increased planning to provide equitable diagnostic, treatment, and services for all students so that they can reach their potential (U.S. Department of Health, 2025).

Special education teachers and other service providers, such as speech and occupational therapists, physical therapists, social workers, and others, are responsible for determining the

best ways to meet students' needs and help students achieve their goals (Rodgers, 2021).

Through collaboration, educators prepare students for their future and help them achieve their life aspirations. Research-based instructional strategies, such as implementing specially designed instruction, are designed to support students in achieving success in the classroom (Jackson & Parker, 2023). Students with high-needs disabilities learn to use these strategies throughout school and in the real world to help them succeed (Rodgers, 2021). Special education teachers need strategies and guidance in order to support their students effectively. They want to help, but often they have not been taught how to teach or have the knowledge to support these unique learners.

### ***Special Education teachers***

Over the years, the role of a teacher has evolved, taking on additional responsibilities. Teachers end up wearing many hats, feeling unsupported and overworked. The National Center for Educational Statistics reports that in the 2020-2021 school year, 16% of public-school teachers and 18% of private school teachers either left the education field or moved to another school. The main reasons for leaving were personal, salary, classroom, and school issues (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). There are often increased demands for teachers in districts, especially where high-stakes testing is linked to job performance. Special education teachers-experience these stressors in addition to supporting students with learning, social, emotional, physical, or communicative difficulties. They also face additional challenges, including limited resources, excessive paperwork, the need to write individualized education plans (IEPs), and the expectation of knowing how to support behaviors, conduct evaluations, and more (Sowerby, 2023). Blad (2024) suggested that Special Education teachers are often stressed because they lack the resources and support to do their jobs well, not because of the students they

serve. As a result, Blad (2024) suggested that administrators could address the stressors by seeking professional development on supporting Special Education teachers and providing feedback on how to effectively include them in the curriculum.

Teachers in urban school districts experience higher levels of burnout and lower job satisfaction (Elliott et al., 2023). An estimated 40-50% of new K-12 teachers in urban schools leave the classroom within the first five years of teaching (Elliott et al., 2023). It is estimated that within the next decade, 1.5 million new teachers will be needed to fill classrooms (Elliott et al., 2023). The shortage has become a concern for policymakers and U.S. citizens. In July 2024, it was reported that 406,964 teaching positions were vacant, with uncertified teachers filling them, equating to one in every eight teaching positions in the United States (Tan et al., 2024).

According to Hammond and Carver-Thomas (2019), historical records indicate that teacher shortages have been a recurring issue during crises dating back to the 1930s. Subjects such as math and science have struggled with staffing classrooms since the 1950s, and special education has its roots in the 1960s. Over the years, research has sought to detect and track data by examining supply, demand, and a theoretical framework for understanding teacher shortages and their impact on the nation (Hammond & Carver-Thomas, 2019). Incorporating policy and interventions can help to address the key factors that drive teachers to leave school, and education could help to stabilize and improve the work environment, so that students can achieve, resulting in retaining teachers who are informed, certified, well-prepared, and committed in the classrooms (Hammond & Carver-Thomas, 2019). Retention of teachers requires a comprehensive approach that prepares them and provides an environment that supports their growth, enabling them to be effective in their work (Hammond & Carver-Thomas, 2019). Development of strong, supportive school leaders and state policymakers, in partnership

with local education agencies, school leadership training programs, and other key stakeholders, can develop rigorous training program accreditation and principal licensure standards aligned with research on effective school leadership, as well as systems for regular program review by qualified experts (Hammond & Carver-Thomas, 2019).

The role of a teacher has developed, adding more responsibilities. Teachers wear many hats, often feeling stressed, unsupported, and overworked. Additionally, they must be able to adapt to the ever-changing education landscape, including changes in funding, legislation, and the sociopolitical climate (Jackson & Parker, 2023). Combining these shifts for new teachers is even more challenging, as they must learn the job while doing it, along with the specialized demands and responsibilities of a Special Education teacher, which can be overwhelming (Jackson & Parker, 2023). Due to these factors, attrition and burnout in the special education field have remained a concern for decades (Jackson & Parker, 2023). Adding to these concerns are retirements and the continued decline in the number of students enrolled in teacher colleges. Over recent years, education vacancies have consistently ranked highest nationwide (Hammond and Carver-Thomas, 2019), prompting increased concern.

The teacher shortage does not support current Special Education teachers, as it adds even more stress, leading to lasting effects on students, schools, and teachers (Jackson & Parker, 2023). The teacher shortage has both short- and long-term effects, leading to higher caseloads for Special Education teachers and less time to address individual needs and deliver individualized instruction (Jackson & Parker, 2023). It also increases the likelihood that students who require highly trained teachers need someone who can effectively teach and support high-needs students in the classroom. Several factors may be linked to the success or difficulties of Special Education teachers, including teacher education programs, emotional resilience, experience in exceptional

education, and background (Hammond & Carver-Thomas, 2019). Additional factors related to retention include the assignment, schools, demands, and administrative support (Locquiao & Desutter, 2023). Even with the trends, the available research seems to lack investigation of teacher stress in general within urban districts; most research is outdated and focuses on the experience rather than the factors that contribute to teacher stressors (Elliott et al., 2023). The need for additional research encompassing these elements should be pursued (Elliott et al., 2023).

Working conditions for teachers are often more challenging in urban districts due to the additional challenges associated with working in such environments (Billingsley et al., 2020). According to Elliott et al. (2023), teaching is one of the most stressful occupations, with 46% of teachers reporting daily high stress levels. Teacher stress is more prevalent in urban districts due to job demands, limited resources, and challenges that are not always present in rural and suburban districts. In a recent study involving 121 urban elementary school teachers, 93% reported high levels of stress. The teacher's stress impacts their work, performance, and student success (Elliott et al., 2023). Examining teacher stress and its causes is crucial for understanding the basis of teacher attrition and retention, as well as for developing effective strategies to support teacher retention in the classroom. Herman et al. (2020) reiterated that research has examined student academic success and social and behavioral outcomes. However, little has been done to understand and support teachers, which is an intriguing oversight, as the well-being of teachers is crucial for supporting and educating students in the classroom. The prolonged stress and lack of coping skills among teachers contribute to their overall physical and emotional well-being, leading to burnout and, consequently, teacher attrition. Teacher burnout and stress

have a significant impact on staffing, student achievement, and the overall educational system (Herman et al., 2020).

In the United States, at least 40% of new teachers leave the education system within the first five years for various reasons, including burnout. (Herman et al., 2020). Teacher burnout is another documented factor that leads to attrition (Park & Shin, 2020). Teacher burnout is often associated with poor physical and psychological well-being and decreased performance. Burnout impacts how teachers perform and their interactions with students. Burnout develops over time, slowly evolving into something challenging to correct (Park & Shin, 2020). Teacher burnout can be attributed to numerous factors, including student and teacher motivation, which may lead to fatigue, hostility, discouragement, maladjustment, frustration, anger, and fear (Park & Shin, 2020). Burnout is a psychological condition where the negative emotions towards work, others, and themselves cause issues that need to be addressed. Still, it often leads to leaves of absence or leaving the field entirely (Park & Shin, 2020). Jackson and Parker (2023) described burnout as multiple factors, including emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and feelings of reduced personal accomplishment. Burnout is typically associated with helping and service-focused professions and is considered a precursor to attrition (Jackson & Parker, 2023). Teacher burnout and stress have a significant impact on staffing, student achievement, and the overall educational system. In addition to these factors, the COVID-19 pandemic added another layer of stress to the education world. Special Education teachers were given new challenges, ensuring they receive their services and free and appropriate public education (FAPE) (Jackson & Parker, 2023). The introduction of virtual and blended learning was a huge hurdle to try to manage, especially with students with high-needs disabilities, such as ASD. The pandemic made learning, access, and equity even more challenging (Jackson & Parker, 2023). Teachers and students were not

academically or mentally prepared for the transition; many schools lacked a format to support remote learning, particularly when they needed to provide SDI (Jackson & Parker, 2023). The increased demands of navigating both the online and virtual worlds pushed more teachers out of education (Jackson & Parker, 2023). To better understand attrition, retention, and strategies for retaining teachers in classrooms, examining teacher stress and its causes is critical. Teachers are the foundation of education; it is an intriguing oversight, as the well-being of teachers is crucial to supporting and educating students in the classroom. The prolonged stress and lack of coping skills among teachers contribute to their overall physical and emotional well-being, leading to burnout and, consequently, teacher attrition.

Working conditions have been linked to the quality of Special Education teachers' feelings about working in schools. Teachers are found to continue coming to work when they feel supported by administrators and colleagues. How Special Education teachers perceive their work each day is crucial to helping them stay in the classroom. When long-standing issues in schools trigger negative feelings, such as increased stress, low job satisfaction, and a lack of commitment to the organization, these feelings are exacerbated by a lack of support, insufficient resources, excessive student numbers, and overwhelming paperwork and responsibilities. These factors can lead to ineffectiveness and a lack of pride in their teaching (Billingsley, 2004). Special education teachers need confidence in themselves to support students in the classroom (Jackson & Parker, 2023). Understanding teacher stress is one of the most potent factors in a Special Education teacher's success, including daily or weekly stress from the school, parents, students' abilities and needs, politics, and conflicting expectations and goals. Chronic stress has been shown to lead to burnout and exhaustion. Factors that can lead to these feelings include a lack of support and attrition rates. Strategies to support these feelings, such as stress management

workshops, peer collaboration, and mentoring programs, have been shown to help (Billingsley, 2004). Although some special education researchers have investigated the relationship between attrition and demographic variables (e.g., age, gender, and race), age is among the few variables consistently linked to attrition (Theobald et al., 2021). Several studies have also documented the importance of personal circumstances in some decisions to leave. Evidence shows that school districts have struggled to fill classrooms and positions for exceptional education teachers (Theobald et al., 2021). Billingsley (2004) suggested that providing support to teachers increases their job satisfaction, which is one of the most effective ways to decrease attrition rates.

Special Education teachers' beliefs influence how they teach and implement strategies with their students. (Han & Cummings, 2022). Teachers' beliefs regarding student success and work often develop from their intrinsic beliefs and education in specific topics (Han & Cummings, 2022). The increase in students with high-needs leads more teachers to feel underprepared to work with students who require additional support, as they often lack knowledge of how to support them and their growth (Han & Cummings, 2022). Han and Cummings (2022) examine research studies investigating teachers' beliefs and their impact on students. The Pygmalion effect can be observed in classrooms when expectations are set low; the results are evident. Through setting the bar high, teachers can help students reach higher levels of success. How teachers perceive and interact with their students can directly impact their academic, social, and emotional progress, as well as their overall well-being. For example, general education teachers hold firmer beliefs in their success with students with mild physical disabilities than with students with high-need disabilities (Han & Cummings, 2022). These would include physical, intellectual, behavioral, and communicative disorders, also encompassing students with ASD, as they are often associated with behavioral issues. These

beliefs, or lack thereof, that all students can be successful teachers often lead to underestimating students' abilities, resulting in a watered-down curriculum and lowered expectations. Stark and Kosloski (2022) highlighted another aspect of the issue: the emotional support and understanding that Special Education teachers require to endure their daily challenges. Educators often lack the resources, tools, or training to manage the emotional rollercoaster that a Special Education teacher's role can entail. Thus, the recommendation is to increase the need for professional training, support, advocacy, and develop relationships with students (Stark & Kosloski, 2022). These findings indeed show the need for increasing professional development opportunities, especially surrounding ASD and other high-need disabilities. Few studies have examined teachers' belief systems and how they perceive teaching students with ASD or other high-need students (Han & Cummings, 2022).

Special education teachers often experience additional work and stressors as they adjust the curriculum and support students with learning, social, emotional, physical, or communicative difficulties. Teachers must also manage limited resources, additional paperwork, writing individualized education plans (IEPs), and the expectation that they are knowledgeable about supporting behaviors, evaluations, and related tasks (Sowerby, 2023). These responsibilities are coupled with demands from school districts, buildings, parents, and the community, increasing pressure on Special Education teachers. The tasks and responsibilities are even more taxing on new teachers, who are expected to work magic with a challenging population in difficult situations and classrooms. School education programs are often found to lack guidance on how to help educators manage the stress and emotional demands of the school day, students, and the workload (Elliott et al., 2023). According to Park and Shin (2020), student-teacher and school-related variables contribute to Special Education teachers' burnout. Therefore, Special Education

teachers require support and access to necessary resources to help mitigate burnout. Student variables contributing to burnout include age, disability, behavioral issues, class size, socioeconomic status, and classroom setting. Special Education teachers who are assigned to instruct students with emotional disorders exhibit higher burnout than those instructing students with intellectual disabilities (Park & Shin, 2020).

Teacher-related variables that contribute to burnout include the teacher's age, gender, experience, educational level, coping strategies, and external stressors. The other variable Park and Shin (2020) examined was school-related. These include support staff, available resources, and support from the school, all of which take into account the increased workload and the emphasis on accountability for Special Education teachers. Park and Shin (2020) revealed that teachers who believe they lack support are at a higher risk of burnout; they feel more supported when administrators value their opinions, provide helpful feedback, and offer input on school decisions. It can be challenging for anyone to manage their stress; when combined with high-needs students, it becomes even more daunting. Teachers also often support students and their families, frequently becoming part of their lives, as they spend more time with teachers during the week than with their families (Stark & Kosloski, 2022). The workloads of Special Education teachers include teaching and managing classrooms, case management, progress monitoring, and updating students' Individualized Education Plans (IEP) (Park & Shin, 2020). Jackson and Parker (2023) discussed how, although Special Education teachers are often assigned to work with high-needs students, this can contribute to elevated levels of stress and a negative attitude toward the class or school, leading to retention issues. Assigning a special education teacher an unmanageable caseload is another concern. It contributes to a sense of overwork and a lack of ability to manage students, collect data, and complete paperwork for their special education

students. (Jackson & Parker, 2023). These issues and concerns that overwhelm Special Education teachers of all experiences drive them to leave the classroom behind.

Although there are classroom vacancies, opinions differ on what precisely constitutes a teacher shortage. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 74 percent of public schools had difficulty filling special education vacancies in the 2024-25 school year. It was also reported that many public schools had difficulty finding qualified candidates (64 percent) and that there were not enough candidates, 62 percent of whom were applying (School Pulse Panel - (Interactive Results, 2024). Many subjects and grade levels have never had issues filling positions such as social studies and English. Other subjects, such as math, science, special education, and world language, are historically more challenging for staff. Staffing issues can be regional and attributed to specific subjects or specialties. Staffing levels are influenced by factors such as demographics, compensation, benefits, grade levels, and subject areas (Elliott et al., 2023). Theobald et al. (2021) shared their findings on the impact of teacher preparation programs and staffing of special education positions in their research. They argue that there may not be a teacher shortage; the certified Special Education teachers are just not teaching. The study discusses the need for policy changes to encourage Special Education teachers to return to the classroom and to high-needs classrooms (Theobald et al., 2021). Teaching in public schools can be one of the most stressful jobs in the United States, with teachers' stress levels continuing to climb (Elliott et al., 2023). The prevalence of teacher stress is even higher in urban districts due to the high demands of the job, limited resources, and the need to meet improvement goals. There are distinct reasons for the vacancies, including low pay, pressure from administrators, safety concerns, teachers nearing retirement, and a new generation choosing other career fields. Shortages are more prevalent in economically disadvantaged areas (Elliott et al., 2023).

School climate is another factor that can both support and hinder the work environment. Teacher morale and the building's climate are key factors that influence whether teachers remain in or leave a position; those who feel more positively are more likely to remain and feel connected to the building. Using school climate as a rationale for attrition is challenging, as it is often tied to multiple other factors. Despite the growing need, many teacher education programs still fail to provide adequate training for managing high-needs classrooms, yet graduates are frequently assigned to instruct these student populations (Walker et al., 2024). Strategies must be investigated to improve teacher preparedness and success during their initial years of practice or when transitioning to work with new student populations, such as high-needs students (Grobart & Zepp, 2024). Research surrounding teacher preparation programs for high-needs classrooms has identified several persistent challenges for practicing teachers' students (Grobart & Zepp, 2024). Walker et al. (2024) and Donath et al. (2023) documented the inadequacy of pre-service training programs in preparing educators for the complex demands of teaching students with severe disabilities. These findings align with previous work by Tristani and Bassett-Gunter (2020), who highlighted the expanding role expectations placed on Special Education teachers without corresponding increases in preparation or support.

In the context of the increasing prevalence of ASD and related conditions, Young et al. (2023) and Maenner et al. (2023) have emphasized the urgency of addressing these preparation gaps. Many educators need to be more adequately prepared for classrooms with students exhibiting extreme behaviors, communication disorders, and complex medical needs, among other challenges (Donath et al., 2023). The observed gap between teacher preparation and the realities of high-needs classrooms underscores the critical need for enhanced pre-service training and ongoing professional development in special education (Walker et al., 2024). In California,

two-thirds (64%) of new Special Education teachers in 2016 were not fully prepared for teaching, having received below-standard teaching certification, which continues to harm the nation's schools and students (Hammond & Carver-Thomas, 2019). Parents and communities struggle with the idea that classrooms are empty because of a lack of certified teachers. Even teachers who undergo education and rigorous certification exams and then start a teaching position often leave within the first five years of teaching (Sowerby, 2023).

When the teachers' positive energy flows, it carries over onto the students. When teachers' energy is lacking or detrimental, it is evident in students' behavior and academic success (Stark & Kosloski, 2022). The teacher's emotions can affect the entire day, week, or year. Many of these behaviors appear to be unconscious, resulting in less time spent on lesson planning, addressing student and parent needs, and even instructional time when not providing waiting time or correct support. These things are crucial, especially in the unique world of education. Special Education teachers have more demands than other teachers, as they are assigned more challenging and exceptional students, additional paperwork, and pressures from the school and district (Stark & Kosloski, 2022). One of the most challenging aspects to address is that students who require the most support and strategies to succeed in the classroom often end up with the least prepared teachers (Hammond & Carver-Thomas, 2019). Through their work, they report that classrooms with high-needs students are usually the hardest to fill, leaving them without teachers or with staff who lack training in disabilities and knowledge of what the students need and how they should be taught (Hammond & Carver-Thomas, 2019). The supply and demand of Special Education teachers are influenced by many factors that can contribute to the teacher shortage. The shortage can lead to profound and long-lasting implications for students with disabilities. Shortages can lead school districts to reduce services or increase class

sizes to help cope with the teacher shortage. Without services and support, students cannot access the support they need to succeed (Billingsley, 2004). The shortage has become a concern for policymakers and U.S. citizens. In July 2024, it was reported that 406,964 teaching positions were vacant, with uncertified teachers filling them, equating to one in every eight teaching positions in the United States (Tan et al., 2024). There are distinct reasons for the shortage of teachers, especially in special education. Over the years, the role of a teacher has evolved, taking on additional responsibilities. Teachers end up wearing many hats, feeling unsupported and overworked. These feelings can lead to attrition and burnout, especially when they feel their work goes unnoticed and unsupported by administrators.

Additional factors influencing teachers' retention include the lack of administrative support, salaries, school size, and demographics (Hammond & Carver-Thomas, 2019). This results in districts that can offer the highest salaries, are better prepared, are most supported by their administrators, and are the least likely to leave their schools or the education field (Hammond & Carver-Thomas, 2019). For teachers and students alike to succeed, there needs to be an understanding and belief system that allows everyone to achieve their goals. There are distinct reasons for the shortage of teachers, especially in special education. Over the years, the role of a teacher has evolved, taking on additional responsibilities. Teachers end up wearing many hats, feeling unsupported and overworked. These feelings can lead to attrition and burnout, especially when they feel their work goes unnoticed and unsupported by administrators. Special education teachers need confidence in themselves to support students in the classroom (Jackson & Parker, 2023).

### *Instructional Supports*

Like many aspects of education, special education has many policies and mandates that must be implemented to ensure student equity. Policymakers, reformers, and educators continue to raise concerns about student outcomes for students with disabilities (Woulfin & Jones, 2021). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) legislation was implemented in 1975. However, there are still gaps in the implementation of special education instruction, services, and approaches, as well as opportunities to improve the way the needs of students with disabilities are addressed (Woulfin & Jones, 2021). School districts typically encourage the use of evidence-based practices to support instruction at all levels, ensuring that students receive high-quality instruction. Students with disabilities also require additional support, especially those with high-needs disabilities such as ASD. As Hornby (2021) described, Special Education teachers should support inclusion and teach the strategies students need to be successful and competent in the community after leaving school. Educators must develop specially designed instruction (SDI) to help students access the curriculum (Rodgers et al., 2021). Specially designed instruction strategies are the unique support students need to succeed in the classroom. Students need support and acceptance to learn and grow in the classroom. Too often, teachers who are not versed in strategies for students with disabilities are not prepared to help students, leading to anxiety and stress. These additional factors can lead to attrition rates. Teachers experiencing high stress levels are often less likely to implement evidence-based practices with fidelity, as they are just trying to get through the day. High stress levels can be associated with low teacher-student interaction and poor student behavior. Students assigned to high-stress teachers exhibit lower social and academic progress (Elliott et al., 2023).

High-quality pre-service teacher preparation is essential to being prepared and thriving in the classroom. Once new teachers begin in their classrooms, they need support and guidance on how to apply what they learned in their coursework, address problems, and receive feedback to improve their practice (Billingsley et al., 2019). Often, new teachers face difficulties learning the classroom and building memorable roles as Special Education teachers, which can vary depending on the district, school, assignments, and students. Providing new teachers, especially Special Education teachers, with training and support in high-leverage practices (HLPs) is critical to their support. High-leverage practices were developed, tested, and approved by educators, stakeholders, and focus groups, and subsequently endorsed by the Council for Exceptional Children. HLPs incorporate 22 practices in four focus areas: collaboration, assessment, social/emotional/behavioral, and instruction (Billingsley et al., 2019). The benefit of using a system such as this is that it provides a common language that can be shared with special education and is supported by mentors and leaders. Implementing a quality training and support program can help retain new teachers and, hopefully, promote their retention. Research shows that new Special Education teachers require sufficient time allocated for professional development to utilize HLPs effectively (Billingsley et al., 2019). It should be spread out over more than 20 hours, with studies showing that teachers who received an average of 49 professional development hours experienced a significant increase in their students' achievement. An essential component of professional development is having consistent follow-up and support both after and between sessions. This support helps Special Education teachers feel supported and see the difference in their teaching and classrooms (Billingsley et al., 2019).

Professional development is one proven way to support Special Education teachers. Owens and Hudson (2021) examined ways to enhance teacher professional development

opportunities. Their work focuses on how supporting teachers' emotional balance can be linked to the effectiveness of professional development. Becoming a teacher is a career with high demands and sometimes feels like one has little control, which can lead to emotional exhaustion and decreased performance (Owens & Hudson, 2017). Using this knowledge to provide additional support layers could help with attrition rates. Teachers leave low-performing schools and districts more frequently than those in high-performing ones, which is attributed to the additional work typically required in underperforming buildings (Owens & Hudson, 2021). Teachers in lower-performing buildings generally are held to higher expectations than those in other buildings. Often, schools that need improvement are closely monitored regarding planning, training, paperwork, and data collection, which can then contribute to the stigma of working in a low-performing building or district, whether consciously or not. (Owens & Hudson, 2021). Professional development and strategies taught are more successful when teachers can apply them immediately in their classrooms, without requiring additional hours for implementation (Owens & Hudson, 2021).

Traditional professional development at the district level often involves teachers from different schools or grades gathering at a centralized location for training, also known as the "sit-and-get" model. The teachers sit and listen to training; they receive little to no practice, follow-up, or next steps. Training is often designed primarily to provide information rather than to develop skills through additional training and coaching (Bruhn et al., 2023). The model tends to be unsuccessful, leaving teachers in need of clarification about the new strategy. They are less likely to implement it, especially if they need help. Professional development opportunities should be promoted and encouraged for teachers and staff to attend, as it is a way to stimulate growth. Special education teachers benefit from training on technology, behavior management

strategies, collaboration, instructional supports, accommodations, and progress monitoring; the list could go on and on (Toman & Maag, 2024). Another way of receiving professional development is through an online virtual format. Online training has increased in recent years, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. There have been concerns regarding teacher access, retention, and the completion process of these opportunities (Meaghan et al., 2024). Online courses offer several advantages over in-person training, primarily due to their flexibility and convenience. The ability to take the course from anywhere at any time has advantages for busy educators (Meaghan et al., 2024). For professional development to be effective, just like most things, the conditions must be right. The conditions need to promote growth and encourage that growth (Sancar et al., 2021). There should be a focus on transforming educators' knowledge, abilities, and attitudes to improve student outcomes (Toman & Maag, 2024). Improvement should focus on instructional methods, student achievement, and changing staff's mindset, leading to a transition to professional development that uses active learning rather than ineffective practices (Toman & Maag, 2024). Training and workshops should replicate and demonstrate to educators what effective teaching strategies look like in the classroom so that educators can implement them with minimal thought.

Many teachers struggle with implementing behavioral management systems, particularly new Special Education teachers in high-needs classrooms. A unique method for helping teachers in real time was reported by O'Handley et al. (2020). With the bug-in-the-ear (BITE) training, an educational consultant is linked to the teacher through their earbud. The teachers receive immediate feedback and suggestions as they teach the class. The researchers aimed to determine whether BITE supported teacher effectiveness in the classroom, using data collected from three teachers to monitor instruction delivery (O'Handley et al., 2020). They also measured students'

responses to on-demand support. The findings show immediate positive results for both the teacher and students. Given its promising use not only in behavior but also in other areas, future studies should expand beyond elementary schools to include middle and secondary schools (O'Handley et al., 2020). The ability to provide support could lead to innovative ways to support teachers and help retain them.

Certified Special Education teachers leave the field or the classroom for various reasons, resulting in a shortage of Special Education teachers. The teacher shortage may not be a shortage; certified Special Education teachers choose not to use their certifications to teach (Theobald et al., 2021). As a result, Theobald et al. (2021) discussed the need for policy changes and practices to attract Special Education teachers to return to the classroom and to high-needs classrooms. Stark and Kosloski (2022) highlighted another aspect of the issue: the emotional support and understanding required for Special Education teachers, as well as strategies for supporting them. Special Education teachers often lack access to the resources, tools, and training needed to effectively manage the emotional challenges that come with the position. There is always a learning curve once in the classroom, as novice teachers often learn on the spot, which makes it exceedingly difficult. Professional development. Professional development, workshops, and training support teachers' growth, providing resources and strategies to help students succeed in the classroom. There are many ways to conduct professional development and share information. The district is also recommended to provide high-quality mentoring and induction to new teachers (Hammond & Carver-Thomas, 2019). The new teacher programs should include assigning a mentor, holding frequent meetings, and focusing on high-leverage support, such as observations and feedback, addressing instructional issues, and developing a professional growth plan (Hammond & Carver-Thomas, 2019).

Education requires innovative thinking to solve problems efficiently and effectively. Stark and Kosloski (2022) recommended that teachers proactively reflect on their emotions, using a strategy such as the OPEN framework. The OPEN framework is a strategy that helps teachers focus on professional growth, training, and relationship development by tracking and reflecting on their emotional data (Stark & Kosloski, 2022). These strategies can help them find joy and humor in their work as Special Education teachers and overcome the daily stressors they encounter. Thus, the recommendation is to increase the need for professional training, support, advocacy, and develop relationships with students (Stark & Kosloski, 2022). Through mentoring, training, and professional development, educators are offered opportunities to gain experience and learn new ways to teach and support their students. Knowing what and how to present the information, along with the follow-up and support, is critical.

Teacher certification has clear linkages to Special Education teacher attrition rates. Holding a valid certification predicts teachers' likelihood of leaving the field (Billingsley, 2004). For example, if the teacher was not correctly certified, such as teaching out of certification or with emergency certification, they were at a higher rate of leaving the field. Billingsley (2004) also discussed teacher qualifications in conjunction with attrition and retention. Over the years, this has received less attention in special education research, as most studies focus on easily tracked measures such as certifications, degrees, test scores, and experience (O'Handley et al., 2020). Discussions and reports examine teacher quality and its definition, encompassing student teaching, pre-service training, and professional development. Completion of certification is easy to track, as is monitoring teachers who are uncertified for their positions. Attrition is higher for those who need certification and score lower on their exams. Only a few studies examine the connection between quality and teacher career paths. On the other hand, data shows a strong

connection between those who are well educated and those who are prepared for their longevity in special education. Variables such as student teaching, pre-service experiences, and skill level have not been examined in depth, nor has a rationale been provided for the attrition rates. (Billingsley, 2004).

Despite these reports, few studies have examined attrition rates related to academic ability, degrees, and the quality of teacher preparation programs (Billingsley, 2004). The strongest correlation was between teachers who scored higher on certification exams and those who were twice as likely to leave as those with lower test scores. Another study found that special educators who were more academically capable were more likely to leave the field (Billingsley, 2004). Other factors examined included preparedness, competence levels, and perceived effectiveness. Overall, studies do not reveal a direct connection, but they do acknowledge that the better prepared a teacher is, the more successful they are in the classroom (Billingsley, 2004). The work environment plays a crucial role in keeping everyone, including Special Education teachers, happy, regardless of their position. Billingsley (2004) showed that attrition and retention rates are affected by work satisfaction and career decisions and are critical to longevity. Several studies have shown that salary is tied to Special Education teacher turnover rates. As wages increased, fewer teachers left, opting instead for higher-paying positions. Compensation is a key determinant in whether special educators leave one district for another teaching job or leave the field altogether. Researchers have suggested that school systems examine data to help improve attrition and retention rates (Billingsley et al., 2019). Unfortunately, many districts are unable to adjust their salary schedules due to limited funding sources (Billingsley, 2004).

Despite Billingsley's (2004) analysis of Special Education teacher attrition, other factors could contribute to the high rates that were not considered. Studies have shown that these figures are primarily attributed to the fact that younger, inexperienced Special Education teachers are not adequately trained or credentialed (Billingsley et al., 2019). The available studies lack strong, viable solutions for administrators and policies that create better work environments and reduce attrition. Research has examined the issues surrounding attrition and the reasons Special Education teachers leave, including the blame attributed to the increase in high-needs students, inadequate training, and other factors (Billingsley, 2004). However, the available research lacks solutions; Billingsley (2004) recommended that future studies of attrition should consider the factors that lead to different types of attrition (exit, transfer, stay), differences among geographic regions and district size, kinds of classroom model, teachers working with high and low incidence groups, difference in high and low attrition districts, and teachers working with students of different cultural and racial backgrounds (Billingsley, 2004). Figure 1 exhibits Billingsley's (2004) model for steps to prevent special educator attrition, which skillfully analyzes the research problem and purpose. Additional factors could be examined to deepen understanding of the funnel that contributes to burnout, attention issues, and the perpetuation of special education vacancies in classrooms nationwide (Jackson & Parker, 2023). A recent report from the American Association of Colleges (2022) found that, between 2008 and 2029, the number of students completing traditional education programs in the United States decreased by over one-third. The steepest declines in enrollment were observed in areas of highest need, including special education, mathematics, sciences, and bilingual education (Jackson & Parker, 2023). Changes can be linked to the devaluation of the teaching field, low pay, stressful workloads, and the political demonization of the education sector (Jackson & Parker, 2023).

Special Education teachers require school administrators to provide support, understanding, and instructional guidance, as well as offer resources, to ensure their success. Oftentimes, Special Education teachers feel a lack of instructional and administrative support to meet student needs (Shaheen & Bacher-Hicks, 2024). Teachers, especially those who choose special education, are more complex and more challenging to find. School education programs are closing due to a lack of interest, which continues to hurt schools and students nationwide. Parents and communities struggle with the idea that classrooms are empty because of a lack of certified teachers. Even teachers who undergo education and rigorous certification exams and then start a teaching position often leave within the first five years of teaching (Sowerby, 2023). Special Education teachers do much more than provide direct academic and behavioral instruction to students with disabilities; sharing knowledge with administrators is critical in this work.

### ***Administrative Supports***

Special Education teachers require school administrators to provide support, understanding, and instructional guidance, as well as offer resources, to ensure their success. Oftentimes, Special Education teachers feel a lack of instructional and administrative support to meet student needs (Shaheen & Bacher-Hicks, 2024). Administrators are not always aware of all the roles they must juggle throughout the day. Special Education teachers do much more than provide direct academic and behavioral instruction to students with disabilities. Working conditions and school culture are shaped by school administrators, including principals, vice principals, and special education coordinators (Gilmour & Sandilos, 2023). Administrators directly and readily shape staff's working conditions. For example, working conditions are shaped by how well administrators support teachers in demanding situations, such as working

with high-needs students with disabilities. Bettini (2024) reported that administrators need to be knowledgeable about special education and the work they do in the classroom, including when working with high-needs students. Most school leaders report having little knowledge of special education and receiving little to no training during their leadership programs (Bettini, 2024). It would be beneficial for administrators to involve teachers in decision-making, communicate effectively with staff, and provide mentoring to teachers as instructional leaders. Other ways in which administrators can support working conditions can be less direct. Examples include personnel decisions, resource allocation, and scheduling. Gilmore and Sandilos' (2023) research suggested that overlooking administrators' roles in shaping working conditions that promote or constrain teacher effectiveness results in ineffective interventions to support special educators. Special Education teachers want to feel supported and receive the support they need to succeed (Billingsley, 2004). Several factors contribute to the work environment, including salary, climate, and support. Teacher support can occur in various ways, such as through district and building administration, colleges, mentoring, and professional development. Additional things that contribute to the work environment include the unique education student caseload, paperwork, and the ever-changing role of the Special Education teacher (Billingsley, 2004). The support that teachers receive helps increase morale and job satisfaction and reduces attrition.

To achieve better results for students with disabilities, the teacher shortage must be addressed (Bettini, 2024). Overcoming the history of teacher shortages requires time, dedication, and resources to ensure students with disabilities receive a practical education. The essential question to consider is whether the school or district is a good place to work. Are teachers and staff valued? Another school environmental factor is administrative support. Research has shown that teachers are more likely to leave if they lack support from their administrators (Billingsley,

2004). Teachers, especially those in high-needs classrooms, must be prepared at a moment's notice to support students, think creatively, and adjust lessons to meet students' needs. Research has shown that teachers with high levels of support are less likely to feel stressed and are more likely to remain in the education profession (Park & Shin, 2020). If Special Education teachers do not feel empowered and supported by administrators to make lesson changes and decisions, this can lead to additional stressors and classroom discontent, leading to leaving the classroom behind and moving on to another career field.

Special Education teachers who believe they lack administrative support can experience burnout in the classroom. Often, those who report feeling supported when administrators value their opinions, provide helpful feedback, and solicit input on decisions made in the school are more likely to remain in education and within the building (Park & Shin, 2020). On the other hand, the relationship between central office administrators and special education attrition rates varies. One study found an indirect correlation between attrition and the control the department has over expectations, professional development, and positions (Billingsley et al., 2019). Conversely, another study found no connection between administrators and attrition rates (Billingsley et al., 2019). In comparison, another study found high dissatisfaction with central office administrators and building-level support, which influenced teachers' decision to leave the district (Billingsley et al., 2019). District office administrators play a crucial role in determining special education policies, focuses, and practices. Then, building-level administrators must ensure that these guidelines are adhered to in the classrooms, which, in turn, affects teacher satisfaction and discontent (Billingsley, 2004).

Special education always has its challenges, especially if the incidence of high-needs disabilities continues to rise. Similarly, the position is rewarding. Preparing current and new

professionals, as well as those who wish to pursue a career in the education field, is crucial to addressing the ongoing concerns of burnout and attrition. As the teacher shortage persists, further research is needed on Special Education teacher attrition rates and how administrators can effectively support these educators (Bettini, 2024). Research has shown that there are unpreventable reasons, such as family and relocation, as well as inadequate administrative support (Jackson & Parker, 2023). Researching the perspectives of special educators and administrators is necessary to support current and new teachers in the classroom and enable high-needs students with disabilities to achieve their goals.

### **Ethical Assurances**

In this study, human subjects were used, and safety and security measures were taken to ensure their protection and ethical treatment. Prior to starting the research process, I completed the required CITI training components. The recruitment and data collection for the study were conducted once approval was granted by the National University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), as outlined in Appendix A. I provided the Informed Consent (Appendix B) to the participants to ensure that the research was conducted in an ethically sound manner. The participants were informed about the rights, roles, and responsibilities they were required to fulfill as participants in the study. The informed consent included details on confidentiality, data collection, privacy, and the voluntary nature of participation in the study. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from participating in the study at any time. Also included was information regarding the voluntary nature of the study, along with their right to end their participation at any time and to ask questions, so that they could be addressed as they arose. I also shared with participants that there were minimal risks involved in this study and provided the research protocols. Details and information were provided and collected through informed

consent before data collection, including the researcher's contact information, minimal risks, and anticipated study procedures (Halai, 2006). There were minimal foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with the research study. Participants could skip any question they did not wish to answer, any activity, or stop participating.

I have been employed in my current district for 15 years, serving in various roles in the special education department and subsequently in the extended learning department. Through this work, I gained experience working with the special education department and its teachers. My experiences have shaped my perceptions of staffing issues in high-needs classrooms. However, I have not engaged with Special Education teachers in recent years due to my change of positions. For this research study, I deliberately set aside my preconceptions to avoid biasing the study's findings. I acknowledged my inherent biases and documented any ideas that arose about this topic, shaped by my experiences. Throughout the study, I remained aware of my personal biases and experiences. I implemented the reflexivity process, which enabled me to reflect on my prior experiences, assumptions, and beliefs that could have influenced my relationships with the research participants, the research processes, and the findings (Forero et al., 2018). During the research process, I maintained a reflexive journal to document my thoughts as they arose. I also incorporated strategies to ensure trustworthiness, including methods to limit bias, ensure accurate results, and draw conclusions based on data collected from participants (Forero et al., 2018).

The participants' names were collected and remained confidential throughout the process, as no names or identifying information were published in the study. Participants were assigned pseudonyms as identifiers in place of their actual names to maintain confidentiality. I implemented a coding strategy to maintain data integrity while ensuring the confidentiality and

security of the information. Using a coding system is helpful for researchers for various reasons, including data organization, synthesis, tracking, and summarization. At the conclusion of the research, the data were securely stored and will be retained for three years, as required by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The data are stored on a secure electronic system, and I am the only authorized user with access to that information. The data are also being stored on a thumb drive and kept in a locked box in my home for three years, at which point the IRB-required storage period ends.

### **Summary**

The introduction section of this dissertation included background information on students with ASD and other high-needs disabilities, major concepts related to staffing high-needs classrooms, and the problem addressed in the research. The nature of the study, definitions, purpose, and literature review presented in the document help convey the study's importance and highlight the gap in the current literature. The qualitative descriptive case study examined teachers' perspectives and experiences regarding working in special education classrooms with high-needs students.

The problem addressed in this study was that, due to a focus on IDEA mandates, Special Education teachers in K-12 urban public-school districts are often required to teach high-needs students without sufficient instructional and administrative support, which negatively impacts student achievement (Shaheen & Bacher-Hicks, 2024). Despite increasing challenges, previous research has revealed diverse views and rationales regarding the support of Special Education teachers and practical strategies to retain them. Despite the interest in retaining Special Education teachers, available research raises challenges that must be further addressed, such as how administrators can better support teachers. Future recommendations regarding the retention

of Special Education teachers should examine the link between ASD and Special Education teacher attrition, support for administrators, and the development of teacher training programs. Ethical assurances were reviewed, and approval from the National University's IRB was obtained prior to data collection (Appendix A). Participants were given an informed consent form that included information regarding their rights, risks, data privacy, confidentiality, and the expectations of the study. The ethical assurance included information about the research and a notice that participants could withdraw from the study at any time, with confidentiality ensured through the use of pseudonyms. The following section, Section 2, provides details regarding the research methods and design employed during the study.

## **Section 2: Methodology and Design**

The problem addressed in this study was that, due to a focus on IDEA mandates, Special Education teachers in K-12 urban public-school districts are often required to teach high-needs students without sufficient instructional and administrative support, which negatively impacts student achievement (Shaheen & Bacher-Hicks, 2024). The prevalence of students with disabilities, particularly those with high-needs such as Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), behavioral disorders, and communication impairments, continues to increase in school districts across the United States (Maenner et al., 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The increase in the prevalence of students with high-needs is overburdening school districts' ability to provide quality teachers, instruction, and support (Maenner et al., 2023). All students, especially those with high-needs special education needs, require qualified teachers in the classroom. Many teachers leave the classroom altogether due to job-related stressors (Bettini & Gilmour, 2024). The purpose of this study was to understand Special Education teachers' perspectives on the instructional and administrative support needed for high-needs students to succeed, as well as administrators' perspectives on the resources required to support teachers in high-needs classrooms effectively. Three research questions were developed from the problem and purpose of this study.

### **RQ1**

What are Special Education teachers' perspectives on instructional supports needed for high-needs students to succeed?

### **RQ2**

What are Special Education teachers' perspectives on how administrators can provide resources to support teachers in high-needs classrooms?

**RQ3**

What are administrators' perspectives on what resources they need to effectively-support teachers in high-needs classrooms?

The three research questions were referenced throughout the research design, data collection, and analysis. The following segments provide details on the methodology and design of this qualitative descriptive case study. Included are also explanations of the materials used in the data collection processes. In addition, the study's details are discussed, including the specifics of delimitations, limitations, and assumptions referenced throughout the research.

**Design and Method**

A qualitative descriptive case study was used to analyze the perspectives and experiences of Special Education teachers and school administrators. Qualitative research involves the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions used to uncover the meaningful patterns of a phenomenon (Bhalla et al., 2023). Qualitative research encompasses a range of methods and is often flexible in terms of design, implementation, and data collection (Bhalla et al., 2023). A qualitative methodology enables a deep understanding of a social activity or setting through participants' experiences, emphasizing exploration and discovery (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Understanding both the "how" and the "what" of this research is critical, along with the capacity to comprehend the complexity of the subject, which underpins qualitative research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Quantitative research, on the other hand, focuses on examining cause-and-effect phenomena, investigating relationships, and describing current conditions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). For this study, the researcher did not seek to quantify data, test predictions, or conduct a statistical analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). A qualitative method was chosen because it allows participants to discover, explore, and

generate data from their experiences shared during individual interviews and focus groups (Doyle et al., 2020). Participants were able to share their experiences and perceptions and collect data through semi-structured individual interviews and focus groups with Special Education teachers. The questionnaire was designed for building-level administrators to help focus on the problems and questions posed in the study. Qualitative methods tend to be more personalized and can focus on individual stories, allowing for a deeper understanding of the problem at hand (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018) and supporting Special Education teachers working in high-needs classrooms.

The selected design for this qualitative study is a single-case study. Case studies are a method for gathering in-depth perspectives from multiple participants who are bound by a social phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Case studies can be applied widely across various disciplines, including education, healthcare, organizational management, history, and social work (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). A case study is an empirical method in which a real-world phenomenon is investigated, noting that the boundaries between context and the phenomenon may not always be evident (Yin, 2017). Case studies investigate a phenomenon in a real-life context, where the researcher explores a program, an event, or individuals (Priya, 2020). According to Yin (2017), case studies allow the researcher to focus on the “case” and the real-life perspectives gathered during data collection. The need to use case studies arises from the desire to understand complex phenomena (Yin, 2017). The three tenets of qualitative approaches are phenomenon, bounded system, and triangulation. The concept of phenomenon is the how or why of a particular social situation (Yin, 2017). Defining the bounded system for both the case and the phenomenon is equally important, as without sufficient details, the reader will not be able to fully understand the context and setting in which the study is being conducted. Questions

that are too broad often lead to unclear definitions of the case and the phenomenon, which is why cases should be bound by time and place to ensure the study is viable (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Triangulation brings together multiple sources of evidence to ensure the reliability of the collected data (Yin, 2017). The study focused on supporting Special Education teachers in high-needs classrooms within one district, with a particular emphasis on triangulating data to validate the solution and subsequently sharing it with other administrators to support Special Education teachers in the classroom.

In a case study, multiple data collection methods are employed; a case study is not a data collection method, but rather a research strategy (Yin, 2017). A case study enables the researcher to employ any feasible and ethical data collection method, such as questionnaires, surveys, interviews, or observations (Priya, 2020). Yin characterizes case studies as descriptive or exploratory (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). As Yin (2017) describes, descriptive case studies are a method for describing phenomena and the real-life context in which they occur. Descriptive cases focus on describing a phenomenon or intervention in the actual setting or context (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Descriptive studies are a practical approach to examining participants' experiences and perceptions that do not require extensive interaction between participants and researchers (Doyle et al., 2020). The design of this study supports a flexible approach that allows the researcher to be responsive to the participants in a natural environment (Doyle et al., 2020). Using a descriptive design for the study helped formulate the phenomenon under study, as Special Education teachers' perceptions and experiences are the key to the data collected to analyze ways to support high-needs Special Education teachers. The study met the qualitative descriptive case study criteria, focusing on both groups of participants, the Special

Education teachers and the administrators, to share their perceptions and experiences for data collection. (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018).

Researchers seek patterns within and across data sources during the examination and analysis process. Data triangulation is employed to enhance understanding of the phenomenon and align the research questions with the collected data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The study employed multiple methods of data collection, including individual and focus group interviews and a questionnaire for building-level administrators. A case is a single unit within a bounded system. Robert Stake recommends that cases be bound by context and experience, where the phenomenon is a program, process, or experience (Luz, 2026). A single-case study design was employed, focusing on a specific issue within a bounded case (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Case studies using qualitative methods are bounded systems that enable the researcher to set specific boundaries for the research and to identify what is included and what is excluded from the data (Yin, 2018). The bounded system for this research study was the single urban public school district, in which participants must be employed as a Special Education teacher or an administrator. The Special Education teacher participants were invited for individual interviews and then requested to return for a focus group. The use of participants' experiences and insights, gathered through interviews and a building-level administrator questionnaire, was tied to data collection for the research questions. Virtual interviews allowed for the most flexibility in scheduling for the Special Education teacher participants. The individual and focus group interviews were designed and conducted using semi-structured questions. Semi-structured questioning allows flexibility during the interview, enabling the researcher to capitalize on participants' responses and reactions to the questions, thereby focusing on the interaction between participants and the researcher (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Using individual

interviews and a focus group helped gather participant observation while adding a unique element to the research method (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The Qualtrics online survey tool was used to collect data from building-level administrators. The questionnaire contained open-ended and multiple-choice questions to elicit experiences and ideas from building-level administrators (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Braun and Clark (2006) developed a six-step reflexive thematic analysis process to assist researchers in coding and analyzing qualitative data, providing a framework for identifying themes in qualitative studies. A case study was preferred over other quantitative and mixed-methods approaches, as multiple data sources and the level of detail in case studies would benefit the study and provide answers to the questions the researcher seeks (Ridder, 2017).

Several designs were considered as alternatives during the research study's development stages. A descriptive design was considered, but on its own, it was determined that it would not provide sufficient detail for the study. Other choices considered but not chosen, such as phenomenology, which focuses more on the meanings behind experiences than on teachers' challenges and experiences (Martiny et al., 2021). Neither of these options aligned with the problem, purpose, and research questions. After examining the differences, similarities, and applications of each design, the best approach was to utilize a descriptive case study using a bounded system of one school district. The research methods and design aligned with the problem and purpose statements, with a focus on supporting Special Education teachers in high-needs classrooms. After reviewing the various designs, a qualitative descriptive single case study design was determined to be the best fit for the research study. The study's qualitative descriptive case study design can help administrators understand the shared experiences of current special education in high-needs classrooms while addressing research gaps in published studies.

The role of the researcher in any study is critical, especially in qualitative studies. The researcher acts as both an instrument for the study and an insider and outsider to the research process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Oftentimes, it can lead to questions relating to ethical practices, accountability, and social justice and voice (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). At the same time, it introduces a sensitive and unpredictable element into the research design (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). In this qualitative descriptive case study, data were collected from participants by a single researcher who implemented academically developed, unbiased questions to limit research bias. Throughout the study, it was essential to keep in mind positionality while ensuring that my biases, conceptions, and experiences were excluded from the process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). As a current district employee, I followed procedures and protocols in order to keep my biases out of the research process. To help with this, I used a reflexive journal to limit the possibility of bias and negative influences that could misinterpret the study. Journaling helped maintain data collection trustworthiness and ensured I could separate any biases that might interfere. It also helped me reflect on the individual interviews and the focus group, as well as analyze the questionnaires (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018).

### **Population and Sample**

The setting for this study was a western New York public school district, one of the state's top five schools. Of the 31,000 students enrolled, 7,000 are students with disabilities, and 25,000 are considered economically disadvantaged. As of May 2023, 15,050 special educators were employed in New York State (*Special Education teachers, Secondary School, 2023*), comprising the study's population. The target population consisted of 750 Special Education teachers in the district and 175 building-level administrators. The current makeup of the district's Special Education teachers is 81% female and 19% male. Currently, the district employs 110

female and 65 male building-level administrators. The target population was appropriate because the study focuses on the experiences of special educators teaching high-needs students with disabilities in a specific district.

The chosen sampling strategies were appropriate, as the problem, purpose, and research questions focused on supporting high-needs Special Education teachers in the classroom. The study employed qualitative methods, including a sample size and multiple data collection tools, to achieve data saturation. Due to the small sample size, the participants were closely monitored and tracked to ensure high-quality data were collected before concluding the individual interviews and focus group sessions (Doyle et al., 2020). The sample consisted of nine Special Education teachers and ten building-level administrators, including district principals and Assistant Principals, who met the requirements and agreed to participate. Sample sizes in qualitative studies tend to be smaller due to the detailed nature of the cases (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The in-depth interviews make large sample sizes unnecessary, as the recommendation is for researchers to determine the necessary sample size (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Purposeful sampling is a typical sampling approach in qualitative studies—the technique should be intentional to ensure the research focuses on answering the research questions. (Kalu, 2019). Purposeful sampling is a common research strategy that facilitates the recruitment of participants who can share their experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The criterion sampling method was chosen for this study because the participants had to meet the specified criteria to participate (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Potential participants could share information that helped enhance the study (Palinkas et al., 2015). As part of the population, they met specific criteria to participate; the study's requirements determined the participants eligible to support the research. The target sample was 7-10 Special Education teachers for individual interviews and one focus

group. The target sample size for the building-level administrators to complete the Qualtrics survey was also 7-10 participants. The sampling frame enabled me to recruit 19 participants through self-report and confirmation that they met the inclusion criteria.

Participant recruitment began once IRB approval was obtained. Email access to staff was obtained through the district's site approval process (Appendix C), which included sharing the study details, completing the data-sharing agreement, and providing supporting evidence. The recruitment process included emailing the district's Special Education teachers via the Special Education teachers' listserv. The recruitment email included inclusion criteria and additional information pertinent to the study. The participants followed a link in the email to the online appointment booking tool, Sign-Up Genius, to select a date and time for their individual interview within a two-week time frame that worked with their schedule. Upon confirmation of the participant's sign-up, they were sent a calendar invite as a reminder, along with the Microsoft Teams meeting link. Concurrently, the participants were sent the informed consent form to review and sign via Adobe Sign (Appendix B). The selected participants were interviewed individually, and if available, participated in a focus group. After each interview was scheduled, a follow-up email was sent to recruit participants for the focus group. The email included a link to a Doodle poll that asked participants to select the best dates and times that work for their schedules to maximize participation in the focus group. Once the doodle poll was closed, a calendar invitation with the Microsoft Teams meeting link was sent to participants for the focus group.

At the same time, recruitment of building-level administrators started, using district email as the point of contact. An email was sent to all principals and assistant principals, who are available on the district website. The email included recruitment information, with a brief

description of the study and its inclusion criteria. The email included a link to the Qualtrics questionnaire, which allowed participants to complete it directly. Overall, recruitment of district staff was successful, as participants responded to the question of whether they were interested in the study. Inclusion criteria are a crucial aspect of qualitative research, as they help determine participants' qualifications, assess the feasibility of the research topic, and enhance the study's credibility (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The following criteria were used to determine inclusion criteria for the Special Education teacher participants: (a) must be 18 or older; (b) must be a current Special Education teacher in the school district; (c) must work in or have worked in a special class (student: teacher: aide ratio 6:1:1, 8:1:1, etc.) to meet students' educational needs. (d) must have experience working with students with ASD or other high-need students. The inclusion criteria for the questionnaire are: (a) must be 18 years or older, (b) must be a current building-level administrator, (c) must be currently working in the district where the study is occurring, and (d) must have experience working with high-needs special education students. Participants could review and sign informed consent before starting the questionnaire on Qualtrics.

Data saturation was needed to ensure the trustworthiness of the research study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Data saturation occurs when the information gathered from individual and focus group interviews becomes repetitive, and no new information or concepts are shared by adding more participants (Doyle et al., 2020). Data saturation was monitored during the recruitment and interview process until it was achieved. The expected data saturation was 20 participants, given the district's size and diversity (Doyle et al., 2020). Considering the research problem, purpose, and research questions presented in Section 1, the population and

sample size chosen for the study were appropriate, as they align with the study. Data saturation was reached with the participants; therefore, no additional participants were needed for the study.

## **Materials**

For this qualitative descriptive case study, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and a questionnaire. Researchers in qualitative studies act as instruments for data collection. During the interviews and focus group, the recording feature in Microsoft Teams was used, resulting in a transcript generated from participants' answers, which was then downloaded as the data source (Forero et al., 2018). Unlike unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews follow a protocol that includes guiding questions (Jamshed, 2014). The researcher can adjust the organization and control participant interactions through semi-structured interviews. Compared to structured interviews, the flexibility of semi-structured interviews allows the researcher to interact conversationally, clarifying and confirming questions and answers, and asking follow-up questions (Jamshed, 2014). As part of the qualitative research process, the interviews, focus group, and questionnaire employed open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' personal experiences and gather information regarding their perceptions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018).

For this study, three data collection methods were used: individual interviews, a focus group, and a questionnaire. The individual interview protocol and questions can be found in Appendix D, the focus group protocol and questions are found in Appendix E, and the administrator questionnaire is found in Appendix F. Semi-structured interviews were utilized for the study, as unstructured interviews would not sufficiently guide participants toward addressing the specific research questions in their responses (Smith, 1995). The individual focus group interview questions and questionnaire were developed based on the research questions, study

problems, purpose, literature, and expert panel feedback to ensure the questions are easily understood. The individual interview and focus group protocol followed a three-pronged research design that focuses on measuring research outcomes, conducting analysis, and incorporating multiple participant perspectives (Ellis & Hogard, 2006). The protocols used for the individual and focus group incorporate three key elements: an introduction, main concepts of the interview, and a follow-up with reflection (Barbour, 2008).

The scripts were read to the participants for individual and focus group interviews to ensure they are on track. The focus group questions were more detailed, intended to gather more information from participants based on their individual interview responses. The focus group interview aimed to facilitate candid conversations in a more natural environment, where participants contributed data by sharing their experiences and perspectives (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The introduction and review of the focus group interview included listening to others' views and experiences, then contributing to their own experiences and feelings. At the start of the focus group, an additional protocol was used requiring participants to state their names before answering questions and providing feedback. When participants forgot, they were reminded to state their name. Use of this protocol ensured that the correct participant was identified during data coding. Prompting questions were used during the individual interviews and focus group to keep participants on track when they started to stray onto tangents.

The online questionnaire in Qualtrics was completed at the participants' own convenience and was not scheduled in advance. The questions were designed to draw on current research and the research problem and to help deepen the study without being time-consuming for administrators. The questionnaire questions are found in Appendix F. Questionnaires are often considered less burdensome for participants and easier for researchers to manage (Bloomberg &

Volpe, 2018). Questionnaires are often helpful for gathering information from participants, including facts about them, their behaviors, personal beliefs, and values (Pitura, 2022).

Before starting data collection, an expert review panel reviewed all questions, individual interviews, focus groups, and the questionnaire. The expert panel helped ensure that the questions were understandable, concise, logical, and relevant to the study. An expert review panel is a method in which individual experts with experience and knowledge of the topics and issues provide opinions and feedback on the questions asked of participants (Bhalla et al., 2023). The panel included three colleagues with extensive leadership experience in particular educational practices. A Microsoft Word document was shared with the panel to provide feedback on the questions for the individual interviews, focus group, and the questionnaire for administrators. The document was also utilized to capture feedback. The panel was given seven days to provide. The process continued until the feedback was received and the panel completed their work. The questions were updated and revised based on the panel's feedback and subsequently submitted to the dissertation committee for final review. These updates helped to prepare for the data collection process, including the interviews and the questionnaire, ensuring the questions were viable for data collection.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Before commencing data collection and analysis, site approval for the study location was obtained (see Appendix C). Measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and data protection, including obtaining approval from the National University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB helps ensure that federal laws are followed and the participants are protected (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). I followed the IRB application process and completed the necessary approvals, including training requirements, to ensure the protection of human subjects.

Upon receiving IRB approval from the University (Appendix A), I was prepared to conduct my research study. Participation in the study is entirely voluntary.

The Microsoft recording feature captured individual interviews and the focus group audio during the data collection. Using this approach also allowed time to focus on engaging participants rather than on ensuring that all data was captured, thereby preserving data integrity. Individual interviews were conducted over two weeks, and the focus group was scheduled for the following week. The focus group date and time were shared after a review of the Doodle poll determined the availability of most participants. After each interview, the audio transcript was downloaded and converted into a text-based Word document to facilitate data cleaning, analysis, and sharing. Once the transcripts were cleaned up, they were emailed to the individual and focus group interview participants for review and accurate verification, with the expectation that they would return with comments as part of the member check process (Rowlands, 2021). Member checks were conducted for both the individual interviews and the focus group, allowing the interviewees to review the transcripts and help validate and ensure the data's trustworthiness. Including this step allows the participants to provide additional feedback before the analysis and review. Participants received the transcript through email and were allowed to clarify points, add more information, and update or comment on the collected data. When a response was not received within a week, the data was considered accurate, and then I was able to proceed with the subsequent analysis steps. Often, in qualitative studies, data analysis coincides with data collection, as the researcher seeks patterns and themes while analyzing the data, resulting in a continuous interplay between data and ideas (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). During transcription, the transcript was reviewed and edited to a reader-friendly format that reduced fillers such as “um” and excessive repetition, making it more comprehensible.

The questionnaire for building administrators was designed using Qualtrics, an online survey tool. The questionnaire was completed in conjunction with the individual interviews, as participants were given two weeks to complete the questions. National University provides doctoral students completing research studies with access to a Qualtrics account for their dissertations. The account remained secure throughout the process, as I only used it to create the questionnaire and collect participant responses. The questionnaire for building administrators was designed to take 15-20 minutes, with short-answer responses to elicit high-quality data that complement the interview data from the Special Education teachers. The first question of the questionnaire asked about their consent to participate and provided informed consent.

After conducting individual interviews and the focus group, each participant was assigned a pseudonym generated using a random online name generator. This process ensured that the names reflect the individuals themselves and that confidentiality is upheld throughout the process and analysis. I used this process to ensure I would be aware of their identities for data analysis purposes while preserving their confidentiality. Pseudonyms were also used during the focus group to preserve confidentiality. In addition, when reviewing the data from the building-level questionnaire, each participant was asked not to share their personal information and was identified as “Administrator 1, Administrator 2, and so forth to maintain confidentiality. The collected data from all three data instruments was uploaded to Quirkos for coding and analysis; the original data has been stored securely.

To develop a comprehensive understanding of the data, data collection methods included transcriptions of audio recordings from semi-structured interviews and focus groups, which were reviewed and verified by the participants. After completing the transcript review process, the data were cleaned up from the Microsoft TEAMS download and input into Quirkos for coding

using a thematic approach (Nowell et al., 2017). As the data were analyzed, they were coded and categorized to generate themes consistent with the collected data. The data coding and thematic analysis results helped produce the answers to each research question. Braun and Clark (2006) provide an in-depth examination of thematic analysis and the research framework. The six-step process that I followed includes a six-step data analysis process: (1) familiarization, (2) coding, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) naming themes, and finally (6) writing the report.

In Phase 1, familiarization with the data involves researchers becoming acquainted with it by reading, reviewing, and assigning appropriate codes. During the review process, I reviewed the data several times to identify specific codes and themes, which helped to sort the data and begin the report. Afterward, I used the transcripts to support the generation of codes from the data, along with notations in my journal about body language and mannerisms, as well as other thoughts. As I read and analyzed the data for the second and third times, I began underlining and extracting essential concepts and observations. Including this process enabled me to engage in reflexivity and minimize biases introduced during the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2016).

In Phase 2, the generation of codes, Braun and Clarke (2016) explained the need to determine the initial codes. Coding involved labeling and identifying the topics and repeated concepts revealed during the interviews, with a focus on the two research questions. I used semantic coding, which focuses on the data content and explicitly states the ideas found across datasets. Using this method led to the identification and tagging of data elements relevant to the study. The coding process is continuous: the researcher revisits the datasets, codes them, and then reassesses them to create new codes. As the process unfolds, the thematic process begins to evolve. The researcher categorizes the codes and information according to the collected data.

Once categories are determined, they are placed into themes that have emerged from the coding process, which aims to identify themes that correlate with the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Phase Three combines the codes into themes. Braun and Clark (2006) described the third step as organizing codes and the coded data into initial thematic groupings, with a focus on structuring the research to answer each research question. Phase three aimed to code the data to reveal thematic concepts across datasets from the individual interviews, focus group, and collected administrator questionnaires. Showing. Once the data was coded and organized, this phase groups the coded data into categories that may develop into themes and sub-themes (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The organization of categories helped discover new ideas before developing formal themes.

Phase 4 is reviewing, which is designed to reevaluate, revisit, and refine the themes to ensure they align with the codes and categories. During this step, Braun and Clarke (2006) stated that the researcher can revisit and revise the coding categories and the information gathered, leading to reflection on how the information has been organized. Including processing time also allows time to revisit and reconnect with the purpose and research questions, ensuring the researcher stays focused on them throughout the research process. This moves the focus to how administrators can support teachers of high-needs students with disabilities (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In Phase 5, the themes were aligned with the ideas and categories through integration and organization. As I worked through the phases, the research questions were revisited, and the alignment with the themes was ensured. The data were reorganized to ensure responses were accurately represented. I also revisited the categories numerous times and identified clear

patterns within each theme. After these steps, I began planning to finalize the naming of the categories. The sixth step of the thematic process was the compilation of a report on my findings. I prepared this by compiling the gathered information, data, and research into a narrative. The process involved extracting the dataset and quotations from the interviews to support the main ideas and themes for the readers. My final report presents and explains the answers to the research questions, while incorporating the data collected that supports the overall findings. The compiled results were then presented through data interpretation within a conceptual framework, resulting in recommendations and suggestions for future research and actions to support administrators in helping their Special Education teachers in the classroom (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Phase 6 of the research process is writing the culminating report, which brings together. I found it helpful to break down the research into these six steps. It helped me stay on track, reminded me to double-check the data, and provided a system that accurately guided me through the entire process. The writing process brings all the pieces of the research together (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To complete this step, I reworked Sections 1 and 2, changing the tenses, since the research was now complete. I revisited the problem, the purpose, and the research questions as I was writing Section 3. After the process was completed, the study outcomes were evaluated to determine how the thematic findings helped answer the original research questions or contradicted previous research. Also included is an analysis of what additional research should be considered for future studies and recommendations for practice.

During the analysis, focusing on triangulation is crucial to cross-check data and information and ensure their alignment throughout the analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Triangulation is important to ensure the study's trustworthiness. Triangulation procedures are

critical and can be analyzed through member checking, reflexivity, and multiple data sources (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Data triangulation is critical for understanding the phenomenon being studied, as it adds rigor and depth to the study, allowing for peer review of data collection processes and participant review of these processes to help ensure the credibility of findings and analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Data triangulation is crucial, as three data collection methods were employed and analyzed: individual interviews, focus group, and questionnaire, providing multiple perspectives. The individual and focus group data followed the 6-step examination phases. The questionnaire analysis was similar, except that the data from each question were gathered, coded, and analyzed question by question, and linked to the data from the Special Education teachers.

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions, limitations, and delimitations are crucial components of the research process, as they help ensure that the study's credibility is thoroughly examined and followed through (Ellis & Levy, 2009). Assumptions are the foundation of a study and the pieces that help form it; they are ideas believed to be true but lacking evidence to support them (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). As a researcher progresses through the steps of a study, assumptions must be considered during development and accepted as accurate without proof (Ellis & Levy, 2009). For the study, it was assumed that participants would want to share their perceptions and articulate their experiences in the buildings and classrooms to collect sufficient data to answer the research questions. Another assumption was that participants would share truthful and honest information, not omit relevant details, during the individual interviews, focus group, and questionnaire. In addition, it was assumed that the selected participants were genuinely interested in the research study, had no other motives, and would be willing to share sufficient details to fully answer the

research questions. Bloomberg and Volpe (2018) remind us that the human factor is the greatest strength in qualitative studies, as the study was developed, completed, and analyzed. Monitoring and tracking these assumptions throughout the study ensured that certain aspects could not be verified but were considered valid.

### **Limitations**

Every research study has a set of limitations, which equate to the potential problems that may arise during the process. A limitation is the researcher's inability to predict or control the unknown (Ellis & Levy, 2009). The researcher's ability to predict, understand, and recognize potential surprises or limitations throughout the process is integral to developing trustworthiness in qualitative research design (Ellis & Levy, 2009). Within qualitative studies, limitations can compromise the transferability, credibility, confirmability, and dependability of findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The first limitation in the study was the sample size and inclusion criteria; as the study is voluntary, the sample may not be large enough to reach data saturation. A second limitation of the study is that it was bound by a single school district in New York State during the busy school year. Due to this phenomenon, the problem is limited to one district, and it is unclear whether the study's findings can be applied to other districts. A third limitation was ensuring that the Special Education teacher participants were willing to participate in both the individual interview and the focus group. Committed attendance in both activities is critical to the data collection process and their commitment to the study. To help minimize these limitations, I had several dates and times available for the individual interviews and focus groups. I also had other participants available and ready to backfill as needed. I was mindful of reflexivity throughout the data collection process to ensure that biases and experiences did not influence the study.

## **Delimitations**

Delimitations are intentional choices that the researcher makes, ultimately narrowing the scope and participation in a study, such as age, gender, or specific groups (Ellis & Levy, 2009). Delimitations help define and clarify the methodology and conceptual focus of the study, emerging from the researcher's intentional and specific choices to ensure the study's purpose is achievable (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). For this case study, delimitations were constrained by location and time, as all participants were employees of a single school district in New York State during the 2025-2026 school year. A second delimitation for the study was that the participants were Special Education teachers and building-level administrators with perspectives and experience working with high-needs students. Personal experience was considered a delimitation, as it could exclude participants with experiences and perspectives relevant to the study.

## **Summary**

Section 2 outlines the approach I took to address the problem and the purpose of this study, which employs a qualitative research methodology using a descriptive case study. This descriptive case study collected data through semi-structured individual interviews, a focus group for Special Education teachers, and a questionnaire for building administrators. The questions were developed based on the available literature and the research questions and then field-tested by an expert panel of administrators with special education knowledge. Participants were recruited via email groups. The inclusion criteria for the study were to be a district employee and to have experience working with high-needs students with disabilities. Section 2 also included information regarding the study population and explanations about the purposeful sampling and participant recruitment strategies. The study was conducted in a New York State

school district, and the population consisted of Special Education teachers who work within the district. The target population was drawn from a purposeful sampling of Special Education teachers with experience working with high-needs students, such as those with ASD. The qualitative descriptive case study included 16 participants, based on achieving data saturation. The recruitment and data collection process began once I received approval from the University's IRB (Appendix A). The interviews, both the individual and focus group, used Microsoft Teams as the conferencing software. Data was collected using the Microsoft Teams recording feature, which produced a transcript of the semi-structured interview. The research questions, study purpose, and literature review generated the open-ended questions used during the study. Participants were emailed a cleaned-up transcript after the interview to help ensure the data's trustworthiness. The data analysis followed the six-step thematic analysis described by Braun and Clark (2006). Data was coded using Quirkos to support the thematic analysis. Assumptions, limitations, and delimitations were also shared throughout the section. Section three presents the study's implications and recommendations.

### **Section 3: Findings, Implications, and Recommendations**

The problem addressed in this study was that, due to a focus on IDEA mandates, Special Education teachers in K-12 urban public-school districts are often required to teach high-needs students without sufficient instructional and administrative support, which negatively impacts student achievement (Shaheen & Bacher-Hicks, 2024). The prevalence of students with disabilities, particularly those with high-needs such as Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), behavioral disorders, and communication impairments, continues to increase in school districts across the United States (Maenner et al., 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The increase in the prevalence of students with high needs is overburdening school districts' ability to provide quality teachers, instruction, and support (Maenner et al., 2023). All students, especially those with high-needs special education needs, require qualified teachers in the classroom. Many teachers leave the classroom altogether due to job-related stressors (Bettini & Gilmour, 2024).

The purpose of this study was to understand Special Education teachers' perspectives on instructional and administrative support needed for high-needs students to succeed, as well as administrators' perspectives on what resources they need to effectively support teachers in high-needs classrooms. A qualitative research method was used to analyze the perspectives and experiences of Special Education teachers and school administrators. The selected design was a qualitative descriptive case study. The qualitative descriptive case study-can help administrators understand the shared experiences of current special education in high-needs classrooms while addressing research gaps in published studies. Given these considerations, I considered alternative designs for the study. After reviewing, the best fit for the research problem, purpose, and questions was to utilize a qualitative descriptive case study.

Limitations of this study were thought to include a small sample size comprising nine Special Education teachers and ten building administrators from the same school district, as described in Tables 1 and 2. Participation was entirely voluntary and required participants to dedicate an hour of their time, either before or after school, to the study. These teachers were also asked to participate in a focus group, which lasted approximately 90 minutes. The building-level administrators were asked to dedicate 10-15 minutes of their own time to complete the voluntary questionnaire. Ultimately, saturation was reached due to the varied participants, including both Special Education teachers and building-level administrators. A second limitation of the study was that it was bound by a single school district in New York State during the school year. After data collection, it became apparent that a representative sample size was necessary for the study, as the findings could be applied to other districts or populations. A recommendation for future research would be to increase the sample size to a more representative level, including more participants from both groups. Additionally, there was a limitation related to researcher bias due to my work with the special education department and the district. I used reflexivity throughout the research process by maintaining a reflexive journal, in which I kept notes to help ensure my biases did not skew the study or the data analysis.

This section begins with a review of the research study's findings. Detailed descriptions of the findings from the individual interviews, focus group, and collected questionnaires were combined to generate a narrative that answers the three research questions. The findings were organized into three overarching themes, each tied to a research question. An evaluation of the findings helps determine the implications and recommendations for next steps, as well as how to support educators, including both Special Education teachers and administrators.

## **Findings**

Upon receiving approval from the University's IRB (Appendix A), participant recruitment began in accordance with the approved protocol. Special Education teachers and building-level administrators were emailed a separate recruitment message containing the research information based on predetermined criteria. Nine Special Education teachers responded to participate in the individual interviews and scheduled a timeslot via SignUpGenius. A calendar invite was created with a link to the Microsoft Teams meeting. Once participants had selected a time for the individual interview, they were sent a Doodle poll to determine their availability for the focus group. Of these nine, four were able and willing to participate in the focus group. Concurrently, a recruitment email with a questionnaire link was sent to the building-level administrators. Ten responses were collected through Qualtrics from building-level administrators. The participants included in the study were all district employees. The original sample size for participation consisted of seven to ten Special Education teachers and seven to ten building-level administrators; criterion sampling was employed throughout the study. Nine Special Education teachers completed the individual interviews, and four participated in the focus group. In addition, ten building-level administrators participated in the online questionnaire. See Tables 1 and 2 for the full demographic details of the participants.

**Table 1***Participant Listing: Special Education teachers*

Pseudonym	Gender	Years of Teaching experience	Current School Assignment
Eva	F	19	Elementary
Linda	F	21	Elementary
Robert	M	16	Elementary
Nicholas	M	13	High School
Lisa	F	20	Elementary
Maria	F	24	High School
Forrest	M	6	Elementary
Sarah	F	27	High School
Diana	F	13	Elementary

**Table 2***Participant Listing- School Administrators*

Questionnaire	Pseudonym	Gender	Years of experience in teaching before administration
Admin 1	Lindsey	F	1-5
Admin 2	Alisa	F	6-10
Admin 3	Diane	F	6-10
Admin 4	Douglass	M	11-15
Admin 5	Whitney	F	11-15
Admin 6	Sebastian	M	6-10
Admin 7	Alex	Not disclosed	6-10
Admin 8	Griffin	M	6-10
Admin 9	Walter	M	1-5
Admin 10	Kasey	M	6-10

Research credibility was adhered to throughout the research process. Throughout the study, I did my best to ensure that the qualitative data collected through individual interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires followed the criteria for trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Ellis & Levy, 2009). I conducted data collection with utmost integrity, following these guidelines and the design of this qualitative descriptive case study. The use of purposeful sampling, inclusion criteria, and data saturation

helps ensure the credibility of the collected data (Forero et al., 2018). I used recordings and transcripts from Microsoft Teams, as well as Qualtrics data, throughout the data analysis.

Throughout the study design process, I adhered to the case study protocol by utilizing multiple sets of data (Yin, 2017). To further enhance the study's credibility, I also conducted member checking of the data. After the transcripts were examined and cleaned, they were sent to each participant for individual review for accuracy. The participants reviewed the transcript for any discrepancies and were asked to notify me within a week if they found any issues or had any additional information to share. By following these steps, I ensured this research study was deemed credible.

During the study, dependability was monitored to ensure consistent and stable findings. During the interviews, focus group, and dissemination of the questionnaire, I followed the protocols that were designed and approved by the IRB (Appendix A). Dependability is a key component to ensuring trustworthiness and consistency (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). In Section 2, the research process was detailed step by step, including keeping a reflexive journal and noting thoughts on the collected data. I also conducted member checking by sending the transcripts to participants for review after both the individual interviews and the focus group. The audit trail helps ensure that triangulation of the three data pieces leads to dependability. Following the procedural steps allows for another researcher to replicate the study and provide an additional indicator of dependability.

The study provides transferability, allowing it to be easily replicated by following the documented steps of the research study process and design. Clear procedures for conducting the survey and analyzing the data were reported, allowing them to be replicated in another district to determine ways to support Special Education teachers in high-needs classrooms by following the

research design and data collection protocol. While the study focuses on Special Education teachers in high-needs classrooms, the same research could be replicated to examine other types of classrooms or teaching positions. The research design and data collection protocols are sufficiently general to be applied in various settings, and the data collection instruments can be tailored to specific study populations, thereby enabling the transferability of the study findings.

Confirmability for this study occurred during the design and data collection process. I wanted to ensure that the data collected through participants' perspectives and experiences were clearly derived from the data and not influenced by biases or the researcher's prior experience. I discerned from the collected data that saturation had been reached, as I noticed the data became repetitive and redundant, signaling that patterns and topics emerged without new insights (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). During the six-phase analysis process, confirmability occurred, which will be further discussed below, by beginning with code identification, which led to categories, themes, and connections to the research questions, in turn informing future recommendations. By implementing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, I ensured that data validation occurred throughout the research process.

During the analysis process, Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-step reflexive thematic analysis was used to code and analyze the data, thereby ensuring detailed descriptions of the findings. Reflexive thematic analysis is an iterative process that involves going through six phases of coding and analyzing data to determine categories and themes. This rigorous process ultimately led to the production of a narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Phase One was the familiarization of data. This initial phase focused on becoming familiar with the data and gaining knowledge of the data to perform the remaining analysis steps. During the initial phase, the data was cleaned up from the transcript downloads, removed ums

and duplicate words, and corrected any other errors that had been incorrectly transcribed. During this phase, I also worked to eliminate specific school names and references to other staff, replacing them with pseudonyms. I also created a demographic table with basic participant information and pseudonyms for each participant, as well as for Special Education teachers and building-level administrators, generated through a name generator website (see Tables 1 and 2). This phase also allowed for time to read, re-read, and process the data, and permitted critical thinking time to begin interpreting the responses (Braun & Clarke, 2022)

Phase Two, generating initial codes, involved generating initial codes from the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Codes were created as I examined the data, seeking evidence to connect to the research questions. I utilized Quirkos, an online system to support coding of the individual interviews, focus group, and questionnaire. Throughout the process, I coded and uncoded the data needed to answer the research questions and recorded them into codes. To ensure Quirkos functions correctly, I needed to remove all images associated with everyone in the transcript. The transcript had images associated with each participant's response. Once the initial codes were in Quirkos, color coding was used to distinguish related topics. Eighty-seven distinct codes were identified after the first round of coding. Data were aligned with the codes indicating each participant's response. I then went back through to count the instances to condense the codes to 62. The coding process was daunting to organize; using Quirkos made it more manageable, as the additional elements of color and imagery helped visualize the data.

Phase 3, generating initial themes, involved developing initial themes related to the research questions. To conduct this phase, categories needed to be created. The categories provided an additional layer of organization for the data, helping group the codes into similar groups and features, generating 21 categories (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). These 21 categories

were then aligned to the three research questions. The categories were flexible, allowing new ideas to emerge before formal themes were developed during analysis. (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Phase 4 was reviewing themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2022), this involves reviewing, refining, and renaming the themes to make them more specific and relevant to the research questions. I refined the themes, updating the code and adding or updating categories as necessary. The continuous review of the codes, the data attached to them, and their categories helped develop a deep understanding of the data. The 21 categories were then broken down into seven themes. Each theme is aligned with the research question, providing details on how administrators can support Special Education teachers working with high-needs students.

In Phase 5, defining and naming themes, I further refined and defined the themes and began the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Seven themes were generated; two aligned with Research Question 1, three with Research Question 2, and two with Research Question 3. I took the 62 codes and organized them into 21 categories that were then broken down into the seven themes to answer the three research questions that guided the study.

Phase 6 was producing the report. During this phase, I focused on using the data and themes to develop the analysis and draft the report that encompasses the research findings. Presenting the findings from the research involves more than just revealing the data and themes; it is about sharing the narrative of the data and making arguments and analyses while tying them back to the original research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). During this phase, the data code tables were generated, showing the connections among the research questions, themes, categories, and codes. The development of these tables helps show the research's analysis process, connects the work, and lays the groundwork for future recommendations.

### ***Research Question 1***

This research question aimed to collect data from Special Education teachers regarding the instructional support they require. At the conclusion of my research, it became apparent that teachers in high-needs classrooms may require additional instructional support to be successful. After data collection, two themes emerged during analysis. Theme one is that teachers need collaboration, experience, communication, and family involvement for student success. The second theme is that training must be purposeful and support instruction.

**Theme 1: Teachers need collaboration, experience, communication, and family involvement for student success.** The first theme comprised four categories, each with 11 codes extracted through the reflexive thematic analysis. The first category, teacher collaboration, included codes that participants discussed regarding how collaboration influences relationships and performance in high-needs classrooms. The second category, teacher experience, highlights the participants' background and teaching experience. Category 3, teacher-communication focused on school communication and how it affects teachers and students. Category 4, family involvement, included participant information on family support (See Table 3).

**Table 3***Research Question 1 Coding Scheme Theme 1*

Theme	Category	Codes
Teachers need collaboration, experience, communication, and family involvement for student success.	Teacher- Collaboration	1. Build relationships 2. Trust 3. Doing the best with what I have
	Teacher- Experience	1. School information 2. Teaching experience 3. Background
	Teacher-Communication	1. Communication 2. Blame game
	Family Involvement	1. Whole family support 2. Parent communication 3. Negative Parents

When discussing teacher collaboration, eight participants emphasized the importance of building relationships, particularly in high-needs classrooms. All eight described relationships differently, but they all conveyed the same message: teamwork among colleagues is essential for success. Robert describes this as “I have that team atmosphere we had... even though it was crazy. We were tight, and I have that again.”

Diana, Linda, and Forrest continued with similar collaborative thoughts, with Diana stating, “The teacher cannot do everything... it is really kind of like collaborating...having problem-solving meetings...for a particular student that's displaying a lot of behaviors.”

Lisa expanded further on the discussion during her interview regarding collaboration:

I have seen it many times over the years, people not getting along  
I am like, how do you not? For me personally... I just go with the  
flow....I've had really hard-headed general education teachers...By the end  
of the year, we are best friends...There's a political aspect to the job and a  
need to be very flexible. To get the students the accommodations...I'm just

going to come in and give them a small group, even if they don't want me to, I'm going to do it. We can do it. What can I do to help you? It's a very fine line.

Eva brought her perspective, but incorporated a slightly different view of collaboration, bringing the family into the equation:

It's just building that relationship with them, and it's a really good feeling that you can build within your self-contained classroom as long as you're the one making the effort to give them all the positives, even the negatives. If you have to give a negative, make sure you have the corresponding positive.

Overall, the eight participants spoke about relationships and how they are built on collaboration through various means. This was discussed from their perspective as Special Education teachers working with other teachers, families, and administration while supporting high-needs students.

Furthering the discussion on teacher collaboration, four participants introduce the concept of trust. Trust is an essential element of the communication and collaboration theme. Nicholas explains the code of trust regarding collaboration amongst administrators and teachers:

Your teachers have to trust you. Your teachers have to trust that you have their back, right? ...because when that kid is in your face and you need help. You got to You have to feel comfortable knowing that help is available, right? Because there have been situations. I mean, I've been in plenty of them. Teachers need to know that administrators have their back and can intervene, helping them in difficult situations.

Additionally, in the focus group, Forrest brought up the concept of trust, specifically, administration trusting teachers to do their job and teaching when they are able, "leave us alone. Leave us alone, district staff. We're teaching the curriculum." Trust can be pivotal in many aspects of any job, especially for Special Education teachers working in high-needs classrooms

and schools. Participants shared their perspectives during individual interviews and in the focus group. Teachers should be trusted to read to their students and teach what they feel is right for them.

Through continuing the narrative and continuing teacher collaboration, five participants emphasized doing the best they could with what they had. These participants describe themselves as doing the best with what they are given, including resources, students, and support. Forrest stated that during his individual interview, similar feelings were revealed in four other instances, which were discussed in both the individual interviews and the focus group. "I know that I am doing the best with what I am given." In the focus group, Sarah brought up these sentiments as well: "It feels like sometimes we don't matter, but we do matter because we matter a lot more than people think that we do. Even people ask me for help with general education kids." Continuing the discussion, Lisa provided insight into the world of administration and special education, emphasizing the importance of doing one's best:

I can see positive changes in her from her first year to this year. As far as communicating with staff, they like listening to us. However, special education is tough. We are bound by the law, so some things are out of their hands.

Another way participants expressed their ability to support students was by discussing their own experiences. Teachers' experiences, both in and out of the classroom, can significantly impact on students' overall success and their ability to access resources. Each of the nine participants spoke about their experience and current school environment. Sarah explained her background and thoughts on teaching assignments:

I did have English language certification...I can do that. I could do this.

I'm very adaptable that way. I could do a lot of different things. ICT, resource room,

self-contained. [The medical school] was not for me anymore. That was moderate and severe. That student population is my first love, but I was the only teacher in that building with a moderate and severe certification.

Eva described her experience and how she taught many different grades and levels of students throughout her career:

I was ICT for 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th graders. That first year was ICT bilingual for those five grades...I had 15:1 for a few years... then when COVID hit, I got the 4th grade group, which was that 6:1:1...then when I returned back to junior high, I had the 6:1:1 7th grade, then became 8th graders...and now I'm back to 7th.

Diana discussed her experiences throughout her career in education in relation to administrators that she has worked with:

I'm a very team player. I'm very easy to get along with...I've had good ones and I've had ones that you know... I think my biggest issue is that I have had a lot of experience with admins who do not know how to or do not have a background working with students with special needs.

Teacher experience can vary from teacher to teacher; the nine participants have taken different paths to reach their current positions. Each participant brought a different perspective to the study, enriching the classroom with unique experiences every day.

Each participant explained their story in detail, including the certification path they took, the types of schools they worked in, and how they ended up in the district teaching students with high needs. Each of the nine took the time to explain their path. One example is from Sarah, who received her education in Kentucky:

[I was a] NYSSA teacher, as I have a master's degree in moderate and severe disabilities from the University of Kentucky. So, when I lived in Kentucky, got my degree there, the way they do the special education certifications are moderate and severe with specific learning disability

Diana also explained her teaching story during the interview:

I started at [a school for students with autism] in 2013, so that's when I actually started working with kids with special needs, and now [here].

Prior to my experience with [the autism school], I have worked with kids with special needs, but it was through a Family Support Center.

Lisa's described her pathway to where she is now as a Special Education teacher:

ICT for middle school for the first 4 years, it was it was in San Diego...

spent one year teaching at a day treatment facility in Boston, in a suburb...

After that, I worked in the ICT resource room for 6 years in Las Vegas. When I came back [here], I worked at a [day treatment school]. Now I teach self-contained.

Each of the nine participants shared their individual and varied experiences. Although there are differences among all nine, they all ended up in the same district, teaching and supporting these students.

Communication is a crucial concept, regardless of the topic being discussed. It is even more important to discuss teacher communication, whether that involves interactions with other teachers, staff members, or the administration. During the study, seven of the teachers mentioned this in one way or another during the interview. Eva explains her perspective on the importance of communicating:

Communication has been really important for me...When I do my syllabus, when I do my communication to the parents, I do it in English and Spanish. I make sure that they understand it. I have them signing. I have them return. it. I also put it in class Dojo. I send them emails. I even did a Google Voice phone number in case they need to text me.

Lisa took the discussion on communication further to include communication from the district office administrators and communication with colleagues:

Last year, we did nothing for Autism Awareness Month in April because We did not have it [meetings] together...we didn't have one special Ed meeting all year...we would get together and discuss, and the school psychologist would be there and the social worker...[a] memo changed the SDI page...they want it to look different...I don't know how many people open up their emails...you see your co-workers in the hallway... Did you see that? And you're trying to have a meeting in the hallway on the way to the bathroom...it was so nice to have the monthly meetings.

Nicholas focused more on how communication between teachers helps to support students:

Communication is important, even when we are just texting or using a group text. Whoever, Jimmy, [had a] rough night last night, not himself, something like that. It could save you in your class.

Teacher communication can lead to both positive and negative connotations. Four participants deliberated on the concept of the blame game, using it to describe how they felt when communication was unclear and when the “blame” for behaviors and scores is placed on students and teachers. Linda reiterated this during her interview: “They are always blamed. They

are blamed for everything. The whole cafeteria could be going crazy, but it was it was those 8:1:1's". Later in the data collection process, during the focus group, Sarah brought up communication with parents:

The consequences that they do have, they do not care about. They don't care.

You cannot make them care, you know, and the parents do not really see the value in the consequences either. A lot of them will not come to [meetings].

Linda, in addition, added on by bringing into play another perspective on teacher communication through the blame game with administrators:

Especially when you feel like, wow, this was meaningful [lesson] with them, and then they cut you down because you are not on pace. That is something that we did not talk about as much, but that is very stressful for an almost 20-year teacher.

Communication, especially between teachers and the students with whom they interact daily, is crucial in ensuring that they can fully support and educate them. These four participants provided valuable insight into the blame game.

Family involvement is another essential component that teachers must collaborate on for student success. Family involvement can take many forms, including securing whole-family support and fostering effective parental communication. Seven participants in the individual interviews discussed whole-family support for Special Education teachers, and this topic was revisited during the focus group. Diana explained further as she provided her perspective on parental involvement in the process:

I think that there needs to be more collaboration with all the individuals working with that particular student, as well as getting the parents more on board and

getting them more involved...It depends on the family and the family dynamics.

I like to think that I have excellent relationships with my parents.

Maria takes her role as a teacher strongly to get family support and buy-in for her students, as she wants her students to be successful:

I just kept pushing. You know, sometimes you have to do that. To get them the help they need because we know they have a disability...I am very direct with my parents...kids know I have all of their parents' numbers in my phone and I will text during class. I will put it on speakerphone. We will have conversations.

Parent involvement, particularly from the entire family, is a crucial component, as noted by participants in individual interviews and focus groups. They are the pieces that teachers need to support the whole student in achieving success.

Parent communication is equally important to supporting teachers with high-needs students. Seven of the Special Education teacher participants described their own style, and what works for them and their families of these high-needs students. Robert gave his perspective during the individual interview:

I had a parent visit the building today. I bet because I have been documenting everything her child has been doing behavior-wise. After all, he is just slowly shutting down and doing less and less, and the behaviors are escalating.

So I have been on the phone with her almost every day. Furthermore, she came in today, and I was very grateful.

Diana was able to articulate her views on obtaining parental input and communication, but in a slightly different way:

I am really big on being positive. I think it is all the approach that you take.

You know, taking that approach and being positive, you know, maybe talking about positive things about the student before you have to bring up those so uncomfortable conversations

These seven Special Education teachers shared their perspectives on parental communication. They had to build relationships and learn what works best not only for students but also for families to have an impact.

Another part of family engagement for teachers working with negative parents, two of the participants incorporated this into their individual interviews. Parent involvement is important, but as these two share, it can be challenging at times to include them in decisions affecting their children. Linda's frustration with some of her parents is apparent:

I have noticed that many parents seem to lack concern. It's not a big deal. Their kids have been in trouble so much that when I call, the first thing they think is that something is wrong, and I say no, I do not always call for wrong. I call to say hi, you know, tell you they had a good day or whatever. But I have to retrain the parents, kind of because I think they are not used to [positive calls] ...I am the type who will call a parent to say, 'Guess what?'

[your child] just got this.

Maria describes an incident with a parent, where she and the principal had to deal with the parent's misbehavior. "In all my years of teaching, I never had to sit with [a principal] and have a parent chew and cuss us out or really cuss you out."

In connection with theme one, Teachers need collaboration, experience, communication, and family involvement for student success, incorporating views from the study participants. The

participants shared data on the support of students, administrators, and families in achieving success when working with high-needs students.

**Theme 2: Training must be purposeful with support for instruction.** In this theme, all nine participants discussed training in one way or another, either through professional development or regarding specific special education training. Training and support for teachers often go hand in hand, helping teachers feel supported in their success. Within the theme, two categories were identified: training and instructional support. These categories and corresponding codes were discussed in both individual interviews and during the focus group (see Table 4).

**Table 4**

*Research Question 1 Coding Scheme Theme 2*

Theme	Category	Codes
Training must be purposeful and support instruction.	Training	1. Special Education training 2. Professional development
	Support for Instruction	1. Curriculum 2. Instruction 3. Special Education strategies 4. Instructional strategies

The first category for this theme is training. Training is a vital part of keeping not only teachers but administrators and support staff current on new strategies and information. When staff are not up to date, they often feel they lack the tools to fully support students. Two elements of training that the participants focused on were special education training and professional development. All nine participants focused on special education training during their interviews, discussing what they thought was going well, what they felt they needed, and what they did not think was necessary. Diana discussed special education training in depth, as to what works and what could be beneficial to teachers and other Special Education teachers:

You go to these trainings...you go through a PowerPoint...you can always take something away from a training... It is really about having that hands-on experience; they can tell us everything, but where are those strategies? Where are those examples? What can we do?... You could also be a 10-year teacher, and you could have a really tough class one year or a particular student you may need to, you know, help with.

Eva, on the other hand, discussed how she is not always included in the training, but finds the ones she attends to be beneficial:

I really have not had any training that is not helpful, but then again, I am not invited to all the trainings...There was an HLA one this week that I should have gone to, but I was not on the list to go, and did not even know that it was happening.

Eva and three other participants elaborated on how they find their own training and resources to support their own growth and that of their students. Eva also disclosed that she often finds herself sharing the material and resources with her colleagues through collaboration:

I do a lot of stuff through the Teacher Center, so usually if I need something, I get it from there. Alternatively, if not, I do a lot of the book studies because it helps me talk with other teachers in the district to find out what strategies work for them...I have even done some training on my own through NYSUT. The CLRI disproportionality, I also do those trainings. So those have been helpful to you, to know, create more lessons and more book studies in order to help the students here which who are bilingual to be able to. Learn the lessons, and then whatever I learn, I share with the colleagues that are really close, and we kind of feed off each other.

Special education training is a definite need, mainly to keep teachers up to date on new and established concepts and strategies. Training can be helpful when supporting teachers in the classroom.

When examining training from a broader perspective, focusing on professional development, it is multifaceted, encompassing a range of aspects. Examining training from a broader perspective, focusing on professional development, revealed that it is multifaceted, encompassing a range of aspects. Professional development could encompass a wide range of activities. However, its primary purpose would be to educate and support all staff working in the building, whether directly or indirectly with students. During data collection, when professional development was discussed, eight of the nine participants addressed it in some way. Supporting high-needs classrooms and Special Education teachers, especially those who are new or relatively new to the field, emerged as a key focus during the focus group. Robert and five others felt that curriculum training in one manner or another is an important part of professional development for Special Education teachers:

I personally feel that new special Ed teachers should have curriculum training because I feel like special Ed teachers are expected to know it all and do it all... Those of us who have been around for a long time, we can, we do know it all and we do it all...it had been 15 years since I had done math or English, and you cannot fake your way through math. I did not know it, so I would sit down with the kids, take notes, and try to learn it while the teachers were teaching it so that I can... help them during their independent practice...I feel like new teachers need some curriculum support, where they can learn the subjects that they are expected to teach.

Diana took a slightly different approach, adding to the need for training in the high-need classrooms, the support staff:

More training for our aides and our assistants. More support with behavior

Furthermore, consistency with the code of conduct and accountability for students.

Special Ed teachers are getting more training on ways to de-escalate.

Alternatively, help support us.

Meanwhile, Nicholas took a less-traveled path when discussing professional development, including how he feels about attending and listening to trainers without noteworthy experiences. “Sometimes, these professional developments, I have a 25-year-old kid telling me how to manage a classroom.” Maria added in her thoughts that “Without proper training, staff are ill-equipped to support students with complex disabilities.” Training for Special Education teachers and support staff encompasses many factors. From these interviews, the participants share their passion for their profession and continually seek ways to support students effectively.

The second category in this theme, instructional support, is similar to the previous theme and encompasses a range of areas, including curriculum, instruction, special education strategies, and instructional approaches. Curriculum is an important aspect of teaching special education strategies. All nine participants discussed the curriculum slightly differently during the individual interviews, but it was also discussed in the focus group; there was a lot more to say from these teachers. Sarah had a lot to say about curriculum and engaging students:

If we look deeper at the behaviors, what is the function of these kids' behaviors? I think a lot of them, especially special Ed kids, I think that is their way of acting out and doing task avoidance behaviors. They do not understand how to read. They do not get the curriculum. The school is

boring to them. I do not really know. But I tell them I am not here to entertain you. I do not have tap shoes, and I am not going to use my Broadway voice and sing to you, you know? But I will teach you. I will teach you the best that I can. However, I think a lot of these kids are acting out because they cannot do the work.

During the focus group, the middle school teachers and high school teachers all agreed that they did not like the science, English, math, or social studies curriculum. They all agreed they had to go beyond the district curriculum to create or purchase their own lessons and resources to help students complete it. Three of the participants in the focus group mentioned that pacing and being behind are often due to student needs, attendance issues, and behavioral problems. Robert stated in the focus group as an example:

I will second that because even in a co-teaching environment, where I know we are off pace, I know we are, but at the same time, we are going, we are going at the pace that I need to go at.

Sarah brought in a much more detailed and enthusiastic view of curriculum and special education students at the high school level:

From my perspective and what students have told me, they do not see the value in what is being taught in school right now...Possibly for General education as well, but I think the special education population, with 15:1 student-to-teacher ratios, should have choices for an alternative curriculum that is still aligned with state standards but may be easier for them to read or a little more relatable. Like my English 2 class, we are reading *The Palace Thief* by Ethan Canan, and it is about... they cannot relate to that at all... There is no personal connection they can make

with that story. It is a lot of backloading and frontloading. If you do not have the necessary background knowledge, you will not be able to grasp it. It is a forty-seven-page story. It takes us 6 weeks to read it.

The inclusion of Special Education teachers in the curriculum is important, as all nine participants stated in both individual interviews and the focus group. Leaving the Special Education teachers to provide both the content and strategies can be challenging to juggle.

In line with supporting instruction, all nine participants discussed instruction and its meaning, as well as its impact on them. In their individual interviews, they then expanded on the topic in the focus group to gather more information. After curriculum, instruction is a key element of success, as it involves planning time, including individual time, common planning time, and grade-level meetings. Each of the nine discussed planning time, with seven stating they did not have enough time and two stating they had enough time. Five of them came right out and said they take work home most nights and on weekends. Diana explained how she must manage planning time:

There is very little time for planning. So once again, that is something that I do on my own time. You know, those little extra things, especially at my grade level, there is a lot more involved, and then the, you know, the amount of differentiation that you have to do for your particular students...There is a lot of documentation when you are, you know, tracking your students' IEP goals. So, there is a lot more involved than the day-to-day curriculum and instruction that we need to provide to the students.

Forrest explained that he does get a little time to plan, but it is not enough to be ready for the next day of instruction. “We do get our daily planning period, which is, I believe, 30 minutes. So, I do make sure to utilize that every day, and then outside of that, everything else I do at home.”

Lisa adds a twist to the planning time and the ability to get everything done, including instruction, curriculum, and special education needs:

Zero time for planning when it comes to thinking about what the special education students need. During prep, we plan the next lesson. Where are we going with it? What is, you know, a lot of backwards planning? Here is what we need to do at the end of the ELA...Especially when a lot of our prep time and time after school is taken up for other things, such as meetings, grade level, and common planning.

Sarah brings her thoughts regarding instruction and combines her perspective with curriculum, and the bewilderment as to how she is supposed to instruct students at the level that they are at:

When you have 15:1 students in English class who have to be exposed to the same curriculum, which I agree with, but they are on a kindergarten reading level level, and they do not know what a question mark is when you are trying to teach rhetorical question, but they could not find the question mark because they didn't know what it looked like.

Supporting teachers through instructional practices is a key component in understanding how teachers prepare themselves to instruct students on a daily basis.

In addition to curriculum and instructional supports, special education strategies were

discussed by the participants. Five participants discussed special education strategies and the support they need or are missing to help them in the classroom. Forrest and four others discussed this both during the individual interviews and the focus group:

The Director for Special Education has been in the building, stopping by, and it is nice to see a face. I will say the most helpful thing I have ever gotten from central office, was we had it was back when we were working with an organization, the first time, and they came in, and they met with all of our Special Education teachers one-on-one, and they went through and did the specially designed instruction [training].

Lisa discussed what she thought worked for her with Special Education strategies and support:

I did see a more successful school year when the special education department, like the special ed team in our building, when we had monthly SPED meetings...That was so important because we were able to meet once a month, collaborate together, talk about, you know, the different materials we all had or talked about different behaviors or...I have a runner... please ignore...just to talk about what's coming up. Do not forget that progress reports are approaching, and those who need help, especially with the new staff, should be identified.

Surprisingly, all nine participants raised the need for support and training for paraprofessionals and for themselves in working with and managing staff in their classrooms. Knowledge of strategies and ways to support students is critical, especially in high-needs classrooms. Lisa mentioned this through her discussion. "I do not recall any of the aides in Buffalo going for a training other than an iPad training, or I do not recall them receiving training, or they did when I

was doing a training, and I was not aware.” Maria also expressed her qualms throughout her interview with the district and special education department:

I think, overall, the special Ed department needs to offer that technology.

You need to do things quarterly. You need to engage with your staff and have a checklist. Send out an email checklist, and they can just check off. These are some of the workshops I would like to attend. Then you get their feedback.

Special education strategies encompass a range of ideas and considerations, including support from colleagues, support staff, administration, and other relevant individuals.

Support for Instruction also includes instructional strategies and techniques, including how and what teachers are taught, as well as what they are expected to teach their students. All nine participants in the focus group and individual interviews discussed Orton-Gillingham, a reading intervention program introduced by the district several years ago in its elementary schools. The interesting aspect is that both middle school and high school teachers are attempting to implement portions of the program in response to student needs. Five participants reported being happy with the Orton-Gillingham reading program and the Step Up to Writing program. Forrest captured that sentiment:

I am really happy with the new OG program. It's been just a game-changer for our room. I think that it really is a program that although I'm doing third grade this year, so we're phasing out, and it's more for RTI, it's the program, the way it's set up, it's. We are able to bridge that gap between our kids who are identifying letters and those who are building words, and we are able to do that while still working with them all together.

During the focus group, Sarah thoroughly discussed instructional strategies, incorporating students' difficulty with reading, even in high schools:

At the high school level, when you guys were talking about Orton-Gillingham and we have students in high school that cannot read. Through no fault of the elementary school teachers, none of us at the high school level feel that that's the problem, you know? But you know, a lot of these kids are, they just cannot read and they're placed in these, these ICT classrooms and.... they're juniors [with] 4 credits.

The data collected from the participants regarding support for instruction solidifies the theme that training must be purposeful and support effective instruction. Participants' perspectives on the instruction support provided valuable insights for the study. The participants, all nine of them, had experiences and thoughts to share surrounding curriculum, instruction, special education strategies, and instructional strategies.

Both Theme 1 and Theme 2 provide data to answer Research Question one. Research Question one examines Special Education teachers' perspectives on the instructional support needed for high-needs students to succeed. The participants were able to address the question through the two themes, related categories, and down to the individual coding schemes. Utilizing the perspectives of Special Education teachers provides valuable data and insight into the problem.

### ***Research Question 2***

Research question 2 was designed to gather information from Special Education teachers on how administrators can support teachers in high-needs classrooms. Research has shown that teachers in these classrooms often require additional support from their administrators. For

Research Question 2, three themes emerged during the analysis. Theme one focused on specialized support for high-needs special education students. Theme two emphasized the need for school and central office responsiveness to gain trust and build rapport. Theme three involved listening to teacher perspectives and adapting support accordingly.

**Theme 3: Specialized support for high-needs special education students.** This theme was determined by analyzing data on participants' perspectives on how administrators can support high-needs classrooms. The theme was broken down into three categories: support for high-need students, support for student issues, and addressing special education concerns. See Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Research Question 2 Coding Scheme Theme 3*

Theme	Category	Codes
Specialized support for high-needs special education students	Support for high-needs students	1. Current special education classes 2. Student behaviors
	Support for student issues	1. Inconsistency in attendance 2. Covid 3. Learned helplessness 4. You do not know what a question mark is? 5. Student connections
	Address special education Concerns	1. Student Issues 2. Identification 3. Placement

Support for high-needs students included current special education classes and student behaviors. The online questionnaire asked participants about the demographics of their high-needs students. Nine of the building-level administrator participants reported seeing an increase in students with high-needs disabilities in their school building. Lindsey discusses what she sees in her building regarding high-needs students. “Our students are coming to us with more severe

cognitive deficits as well as with more serious physical differences and medical conditions.”

Meanwhile, Whitney gave more precise details regarding the student population in her building:

Just over the past ten years as an administrator, I realized our SPED populations have increased in every building to the levels of 25-over 30% of the population in my building. For example, currently we have 26% of our students are in self-contained and ICT classrooms.

Alex added to the conversation by sharing his frustration with the growth of high-needs students in classrooms, along with the growth of students with autism, “students with extreme behaviors in general education settings and in special education classrooms. More and more students with autism that are preverbal that scream, tantrum, eat objects, not able to feed themselves, need to be toileted.” Douglas, along with four other building administrators, references the growth in the number of autism students in his building. “Autistic [classrooms went] From zero classes to two classrooms this year, and many other students who are on the spectrum but not classified yet.” The growth in high-needs students, encompassing medical, behavioral, and educational needs, continues to increase in the district, causing frustration among building administrators.

Another key element in considering support for high-needs students is student behavior, which was explicitly discussed by five Special Education teacher participants and throughout the focus group. Robert discussed his sentiments when he was being blamed for a student’s behavior in his class:

They had the district come in and teach me how to handle my children...I would have all the parent contact...what I did and whom I've talked to and the reasons... I would put the reason why I called in Infinite Campus, and it was still my fault.

Sarah describes an instance where a student was moved from one school to her school due to behaviors:

I had a student a couple of weeks ago who pushed me, and I almost fell, right? Like he was suspended for getting into a fight. hurting an administrator at another school. So, I'm a little nervous to have him alone in the classroom, but they always pull my aid, and like I have a 6:1:1, not a six one, sometimes one classroom. You know what I am saying? If he hurts me when no one else is there, like they can't. He can't have any consequences because we are not following his IEP because they pull the aides to do other things, and I am not comfortable with that.

Robert described his busy day chasing a student around the school on the day of the focus group to the participants, "I am tired. I have 10,200 steps in today just from today." Sarah took the behaviors component and started to add in administrative pieces to understand the difficulties of working with high-needs students during the focus group:

There's so much distraction and behavior issues that the admin are dealing with... I don't really pay much attention to my admin in this instructional sense. I see them running around the buildings all day with walkie-talkie...chasing kids and doing whatever.

Delving into student behaviors is only the tip of the iceberg in discussions about support for high-needs students and Special Education teachers.

The second category within the theme is support for student issues. What support can be afforded to high-needs students? Attendance can be a significant factor in education, particularly

the inconsistency in attendance; four participants mentioned the difficulty of teaching with low student attendance. Forrest describes this during his individual interview:

They already have such a learning gap... it is challenging because you have to make up that lesson. It is not like you have one out of 30 absent, you have one out of six [students] absent. So, you know it is more important than ever to make up that lesson with them, and that cannot be easy.

Eva describes her encounters with absenteeism in her classes; they would come to school to sleep. "I had students who were absent a lot, and then they would come in because they had a rough night or whatever, they would sleep [during classes]." Attendance is a tricky issue: when students are not in the classroom, they are not learning and are not used to routines. When they return, they are even further behind and feel out of sorts, as they have not been in school, which often leads to more behavioral issues that can result in suspension again.

During data collection, surprisingly, COVID was mentioned by three of the Special Education teacher participants. The data collected from the participants, which includes references to COVID-19, examines how teachers are attempting to support their students in being treated fairly and consistently, while considering high-needs behaviors. Three of the participants discussed the effects they continue to observe in the classroom, which were briefly addressed in the focus group. Forrest discussed his thoughts on how COVID has affected the students that he works with:

Post-COVID, we have definitely seen, I would say, a whole new batch of challenges, especially with behaviors. I think that the transition from being home so much with limited exposure to the curriculum, and to getting focused and be able to participate. I think that as a result, we see a lot more of the behaviors.

Furthermore, Sarah continued to describe her frustrations and uncertainty about the student changes that she has seen:

I am almost out of tricks. I like my bag of tricks. I had a lot of tricks over the years, but I have been trying all different things this year, and the behaviors What I am seeing from students is just getting worse and worse and worse. post-pandemic, I do not [know]. I am not entirely sure why, but it is tiring.

In the post-COVID world, there is at least speculation about what may be driving changes in student behavior, raising concerns among teachers working with high-needs students.

Continuing with support for student issues is the concept of learned helplessness, of which four participants referenced this during their individual interviews and the focus group.

Robert provided his take on student learning and behavioral difficulties:

I feel like they are just more like learned helplessness...

They have spent so much time relying on people to really help them that they Get lazy in a sense. Yes, it is part of, yes, that they need help because of what they have...They are very, very smart children in that way, where they know what they can get away with and what they cannot.

Linda and Sarah brought a great deal of thought to the discussion on learned helplessness, adding layers of depth and perspective based on what they are seeing in their high-needs classrooms.

Linda shared her perspective:

Many of those academic challenges stem from their avoidance... There is a lack of what they really need, and there is a lot of coddling...A lot of appeasement... I will take what I can get if I get something positive, if it is if it is going to calm a kid down and help them, you know, de-escalate and

be able to come back to this in class. I will take it, but I disagree with how it happened.

In the focus group, Sarah elaborated on the concept of learned helplessness from her students:

I have never had students so apathetic. They don't care, they do not see the big picture. The consequences that we have at [school], they laugh at them... [students say] I do not care. He is not going to do anything. I could do whatever I want.

The concept of learned helplessness examines participants' perspectives on students' and teachers' classroom experiences, focusing on students' tendencies.

Moving from learned helplessness to not knowing what a question mark is reflects on how schools, teachers, and staff feel when they realize what students honestly do not know that they assumed they knew, which happens more often than most think. Teachers are going through their lesson, already with a plan for the background knowledge they need to teach, but then they are flabbergasted when something they assumed was known is not. Furthermore, when considering Sarah's remarks, it is an interesting idea to apply to other things that we cannot quite explain:

They just do not have those skills. I was just blown away when that kid told me he did not know what a question mark looked like. You are in 11th grade. How can I teach you a rhetorical question, [and] how to find one if you don't know what a question mark looks like?... if the district wants us to increase our exam scores, we need to increase the reading ability of these students. Furthermore, we are not doing that at the high school level.

Support for student issues continues to grow in depth and breadth, as evidenced by the analysis of teachers' perspectives during their time with students.

Student connections and relationships are critical, as supporting students directly is the key to making the most significant impact on them. All of these participants clearly identified student connections that they have built over the years. Forrest describes the relationship and connections that he has been able to build with his students:

I think that one of the things I like most about doing the 8:1:1 is looping with the kids. I think that, you know, one year, especially when you have a room full of higher behaviors, I think it takes longer to build that bond with the families... by the time we build that bond with them, we can work with them so well.

Linda shared her bond with her students; they keep coming back to visit her. "They are not my students anymore. And man, do they want to come back. They walk by my room every day and say hi." Sarah and the other high school teachers discussed how they try to make the connections with the students and apply them to real life, to help them understand that they are not alone in their struggles:

I want kids to get excited about what is six feet beyond them...They do not have any idea what is outside of Buffalo. In their head and in the world; Try to explain to them why reading is so important. It teaches empathy. If you read something, this person feels the same way I do.

The category of support for student issues tends to permeate the other categories, themes, and research questions; however, that is the heart of the study: how to support administrators, help teachers, and, in turn, support students and families.

The last category for the theme addresses special education concerns derived from both internal and external factors discussed by the participants. Student concerns were addressed by all nine participants during the individual interviews and the focus group. Maria described one of her students and how she approaches students with high-needs disabilities and concerns:

A great teacher who had these two kids, one of whom threatened her 60 times. She had to advocate for him to be moved out of her room 60 times. And he is in my room. He is a piece of cake. He is a teddy bear. You have got to teach them. So, today, you were in the red zone; you were angry and frustrated. You could be in the green zone tomorrow, but you never, ever touch them, and you never intimidate them and make them feel like they are not worthy. Because then you have lost them.

Lisa described one of her biggest challenges with students now:

My biggest challenge that we are having, and I had this last year too, so it might be a 6th-grade thing, post-COVID thing, is that they are not independent when it comes to organizational skills, and that is my students with IEPs, along with with typical peers. They do not know how to put papers in a folder...very simple tasks introduced in middle school that they are unable to complete.

Tending to students' varying needs can be a daunting task, as the nine participants described during the data collection. Each student is an individual, and to be successful, they need their needs to be met in one way or another.

Identification and the identification process were also discussed in relation to special education concerns. Five participants shared their views on the district's identification process. Despite high identification rates within the district, Diana reported seeing students who are not

being diagnosed and thus not receiving special education services. “I think a lot of times, I am seeing a lot more of these students coming in, being not being diagnosed.” Eva shared similar sentiments from her experience sitting in at initial CSE meetings:

It is weird because there are times when I see children going up for an initial evaluation, and they will have me sit in on a CSE meeting as a special Ed teacher.

When I am reading the information and just looking at the student, and reading

The information that's given from all the evaluations...wait a minute, why is this child here?

She continued with her experience and views on the process:

We have to really think about where we are placing the children because it is a disservice to them for whatever amount of time they are sitting in a room that they are not getting their needs met.

Lisa, in addition, presented a unique twist on the issue of identification and the process for bilingual students:

In order to test a student for eligibility, you have to test in their original language. their home language, which is Spanish in this case... they are not reading and writing in Spanish at home, but the test is for reading and writing. I feel a lot of Students who are second language learners may be identified more easily because just because their home language is English does not mean they can.

The identification process is lengthy and includes various evaluations that may lead to continued intervention supports or to identification as a student with a disability. The participants shared differences in their experiences, yet a common thread emerged: a problem with the process.

Five participants discussed issues related to student placement, including the lack of movement for students and the challenges associated with the CSE process for supporting placement changes. Robert described what he must do in order to be able to collect enough data for the CSE:

I have to do three student intervention packets with the matching three IEPs, and once I do that, I have to do eight weeks of collective data before they can be moved. That is a long time. It is a long time, and it is a lot of behaviors it is a lot of issues that can happen in 8 weeks that I have to document. I literally carry a clipboard with the one student's behavior intervention plan that I have to document. Then I have a notebook that I have split in half so that I can document everything for one kid and then flip to the next section.

It involves significant documentation and additional work for Special Education teachers to complete while instructing and managing student behavior. Diana shared her experience with getting a student moved to an agency setting:

I am in an 8:1:1 classroom, and I actually had a particular student two years ago who was very aggressive. I completed the paperwork and made the necessary arrangements. I put him on the agency list. He then went on to 2nd grade, 8:1:1, and put out a teacher who is out on leave right now, getting surgery on her neck...

He got placed at an agency, and I do make recommendations. There is a waiting list.

The waiting list for agency and new placements can be time-consuming and causes angst among the teachers working with the students. Diana shares her thoughts on placement, which she says takes a team to get students the support that they need:

Things that we are lacking because, as the classroom teacher, you know, you

need a whole team to help, really work with the student, and get the student where they need to be

Student placement can be a sticky issue for teachers, administrators, and parents, as it involves regulations and deadlines. These five participants shared information regarding placement and placement issues in the district.

Addressing special education needs and concerns is important, as is listening to the perspectives of the teachers who are in the classroom with the students every day. These perspectives bring together many pieces of information focused on supporting high-needs students and, in turn, their teachers.

**Theme 4: School and District Office responsiveness is needed to gain trust and build rapport.** This theme focused on sharing collected data on schools and central office support, including four categories: school support for special education work, special education central office support, Teachers' negative perceptions of administrators, and Teachers' positive perceptions of administrators. See Table 6. In the first category, the focus is on how schools support special education work through various means.

**Table 6**

*Research Question 2 Coding Scheme Theme 4*

Theme	Category	Codes
School and District Office responsiveness is needed to gain trust and build rapport	School Support for Special Education Work	1. Meetings 2. Time 3. Paperwork
	Special Education District Office Support	1. Special Education support 2. Strategies
	Teachers Negative Perception of Administrators	1. Teacher negative experiences 2. Pulled from the classroom
	Teachers' Positive Perception of Administrators	1. Teacher positive experiences

The first discussion point will be to examine meetings, including their expectations, teacher accommodation, and outcomes. All nine teachers addressed the topic in their responses, and it was also discussed during the focus group. Like other topics, each teacher has a different experience and perspective to share. Maria was clear regarding how she envisions meetings should be conducted:

Structured quarterly meetings among teachers, administrators, and supervisors to improve communication and collaborative problem-solving...creating calendars that support development while preserving wellness improves staff retention.

While the nine participants discussed meetings, Robert and Diana focused on how the administration tries to be mindful when scheduling meetings during instructional time. Robert explained:

As far as meetings, the administration does try to schedule meetings when they are in French, or when they are in a special where I do not have to, it will not affect them if I am pulled. When we do grade levels, it is first period while they are in French, or they are in a class where the co-teachers are not needed.

Additionally, Linda added some additional insight, which helps to see how different each school and administrator handles situations:

I attend most of my special education-type meetings because that is what I am really doing. The other meetings my principal does not even make us go to, which I do not know if that is good or bad. We are kind of out of the loop...we do not have to be bothered with it, but then we do not know what is going on...a love-hate relationship. But I do not want to be bothered with all these crazy meetings.

When reflecting on the data from the nine participants, it is evident that, despite their differing views on meetings and time allocation, they all agree that collaboration is necessary. As Linda said in the focus group, “We need to come together.” Come together to support teachers, students, and everyone working towards helping students succeed.

Continuing with the school’s support for special education work, in addition to meetings, Special Education teachers also need time. Something that there is never enough time during the day. School staff, administrators, and teachers are pulled in many directions and wear multiple hats each day to support students. Seven of the participants shared their thoughts on how to allocate time during the school day to complete tasks for students, including paperwork. Diana explained her perspective, “I do feel like a lot of time is not so much spent during the day doing the paperwork, it is after, because the focus is really working with the kids during the day.” Sarah expanded with her view regarding time and being able to get her work done during her time during the day:

I cannot get what I need to get done in 42 minutes of the day...I work through my lunch every day. Sometimes I have an empty classroom for the day, and I work through my time that way, too, because I stopped taking work home. Last year, after 26 years of teaching, I said I was not doing this anymore. I am getting my work done at work, or it is not getting done.

Nicholas brings an entirely different perspective, stating that he has enough time, having taught for 20 years. “Usually, one period's enough for me to get ready for the next day. 45 minutes. That does not include grading. That includes me getting the plans ready, seeing what I want to do, you know, maybe running the copies.” The nine participants have varying views on time, but overall,

they shared that there is not enough time for additional work, such as grading and IEP documents.

As teachers do, they spoke their minds about meetings and time, as well as about special education paperwork. Teachers, especially Special Education teachers, have additional data to collect and paperwork to complete. Progress notes, behavior tracking, IEPs, and other documentation are essential to ensure students receive the support they need. Six of the participants discussed the amount of paperwork that they have to find time to complete. Diana explains the time constraints that she feels, “They need help to be successful in the classroom. I think often, sometimes [that] paperwork is a big issue because there's a lot of paperwork involved. There is very little time during the day to complete that work.” Maria expressed her concern that the amount of time for completion of quality documentation and paperwork is not what it should be in order to ensure quality services for students: “[The] shortcomings in IEP implementation and transition planning compromise the quality of education and support services.” Sarah additionally explained the number of IEPs that she is expected to oversee, track, and write. “I think at one point, when I worked at a High School for three years... I had 18 kids that I was responsible for writing IEPs.” The participants expressed varying views on special education paperwork, noting the time they needed to ensure the work was completed.

Continuing with the next category for the theme, special education central office support focuses on providing special education support and concludes with strategies. Five of the participants shared their perspectives on support from the special education department. Eva explains how she received little support and how she would like to see more meetings like the one she references:

Whoever reached out from the SPED department to say, hey, I am coming by to

talk to you. And then it was AB. As before, I did not know. I did not know anybody before that, and I do remember that they had us do. I think it was the first day of school or the second day of school. It was one year since all the Special Education teachers went to a school...presentation and it was amazing. They talked about the IEPs, the PLEPs, and all that stuff. I remember doing that, where we had a full day. This is what special Ed teachers should know, should be doing, and this is how we do it, and this is the expectation.

Forrest explains how support from the Special Education department has been in his eyes, “Our new Director for Special Education has been in the building and has been stopping by, and it is nice to see a face. So, it has been good.” Lisa takes a different angle, talking about specific and direct support from the Special Education department to help her with the paperwork and in the classroom:

I have also received more organizational support in other districts, as well as more support with your caseload management, such as how to document and progress-monitor your IEP goals. It was easier in other places because we were given specific ways to do it. Whereas in this district, there is freedom. Progress monitor your IEP goals however you wish. Well, I have 14 different things from Teachers Pay Teachers. What works best for me? I don't know. I try a different one every year. One time, it will stick.

Support from the Special Education department comes from different angles and for different reasons. These participants shared their experiences with the district's special education department, each of which varied depending on their placement and individual circumstances. The participants were also asked about the strategies that they received from the special

education office to be successful. Five participants expressed their sentiments regarding support at the building level. Sarah divulged her feelings towards support with strategies for some of her students:

There are a lot of students who are not in the appropriate classrooms, and they  
They need support, but they also need extra support that we cannot really ask for.  
It's just not... What I would like to see, honestly, is to have someone from the  
special education department come and interview us. What do your students need?  
What do you need? Could I get a subscription to Audible to access some audiobooks?  
Or is there some way the district can provide audiobooks, or for me to have access to  
them to give them to my students, right? Or can I get a Special copy of No Fear  
Shakespeare because it is out of print? The ironic thing is that I am an English teacher,  
and I do not have any books. I do not have books for my special Ed kids.

Linda shared that one of her biggest hindrances to effectively teaching students and providing strategies is the lack of consistent aides in the classroom. "This has been one of my biggest problems, always being alone in the classroom, having no aid, having aids, you know, pulled. I have complained about it in the nicest way possible." Additionally, Lisa provided details about a former special education administrator in the district and how she was able to provide effective strategies:

She did little things [showed strategies], like just maybe putting your hand on his  
shoulder or maybe having a blanket or having this or having that. She would come  
in and actually tell me what to do and actually show me tips and tricks that she has  
learned through special education over time. She told me one time to stand in a  
different spot in the classroom, and that even helped; there were just administrators

who would come in and provide immediate feedback as opposed to an email a week later. Yes, she was a really, really good administrator. But again, I saw her all the time. It was not twice a year; it was weekly. Maybe 5 minutes, 10 minutes - pop in, say hello to the students, see what we are working on, and then provide feedback. Special education support and strategies come in various forms and levels of intensity. These participants shared personal feelings and experiences for the interviews and focus group. A connection was felt among the participants; although they have different experiences, a common thread seems to run through them.

Teachers' negative perception of administrators can be a difficult conversation, especially when you can feel the hurt and lack of trust as the participants share their experiences. Negative perceptions among teachers often spread throughout the building. All nine teachers shared their negative experiences with administrators. Robert spoke in detail about what his administrator told him to do with a student to have the student moved:

My administrator told me today because we were talking about my one kid and we have enough with her currently to get her to a 12:1:1, my administrator said we need to get her to an 8:1:1. She needs an eight with her past and blah blah... I said, well, she has not shown this aggressive, violent behavior so far this year, so she does not warrant an eight. So, her idea is for us to poke the bear until she explodes because she has been known to attack teachers. And I said I am not the one that's going to poke that bear because I am not getting attacked.

Eva discussed her experiences with administrator communication, or rather, not communicating:

It is a weird vibe, but I do not see the tension as much; but, there is also a lack of communication between the administrator and us. So, we might have

conversations with one administrator, they are not sharing that with the other administrators. So, there is a discrepancy with how information is getting transferred. So that is what makes it a little weird and uncomfortable.

Forrest refers to administrators not understanding students or being up to date on the IEPs:

We have had administrators who just did not stay long. I have noticed, especially with the 8:1:1 kids, I think that they do not know how to communicate with them, and they do not. I think we have had some who have not taken the time to read their IEP...A kid who is struggling with emotional trauma, they do not adjust the way they speak to that kid, and they can come out too aggressive or, with some kids, not aggressive enough...you have to know their history. Especially as an administrator, because there's a very good chance that at some point you are going to be working one-on-one with that child.

Eva shared her personal experience with a new Principal at her building and what she endured:

There was a new principal, and she did not connect with us at all. She belittled me so much that it just crushed my soul...I wanted to get out. I just had to get out... She had no idea about how to handle these kids...If you need support explaining these new rules to them, call me, and I will come up and talk with them. I did not know her well enough yet. She came in and screamed at my kids.

These stories are only the starting point of teachers' negative experiences with administrators; there are many more that could be heard and shared.

Five of the participants discussed being pulled out of the classroom during the individual and focus group sessions. These participants shared their perspectives on being pulled from their classrooms to cover others. Robert shared his sentiments and what is currently happening to him

as a Special Education teacher. “When the general education [teachers] are out, we get pulled to cover. I have been pulled to cover at least four times already in the last two weeks.” Linda chimed in during the focus group about being pulled to cover classes. “I do not think it is good for kids at all. I think it is horrible that there is that inconsistency.” Jason then took the discussion of teachers being pulled to paraprofessionals being pulled from the classes:

Kids in the self-contained needed scribes because a lot of them had CP or issues where they could not write, and I had aides in the room, so I had three aides, and they were always being pulled for lunch coverage during English... that is when you want to write... did not get a lot of support from the administration in the self-contained at all.

The perspectives from Special Education teachers indicated that they often have negative experiences during the school day with their students.

Continuing to the positive perception of administrators, eight participants shared their experiences and thoughts on the topic. Positive perspectives and attitudes toward administrators can foster a supportive school environment. Diane explained her experience and perspective based on one administrator she had:

Probably one of my best principals was very hands-on. He was wonderful.

I mean, not only did the parents love him, but he was also very hands-on. He was very appreciative. He was always positive. There was no negativity. So, all of those things play a big role, you know, because like anything, it is like with a child, you know, the more that you kind of give them that confidence, and you support them, and you work with them, the more that they are going to want to do for you. And I think that that is what it is. I think it is just really being a team,

you know, really trying to support us as much as possible.

Eva gave another great view from her experiences with administrators:

They were very supportive of everything that we did. They really found ways to kind of help. They did grade-level meetings where whatever was being taught in the district, they would bring to us, and we would do grade-level [meetings] where we actually learned something, and we could bring it into the classroom.

Those were very helpful. Faculty meetings were conducted in the same manner.

Forrest continued with a slightly different view, summarizing his optimistic view of administrators and what he needs:

I think that having the follow-through from administrators is really important and

I think that we do have that right now. We have a new assistant principal this year, and she has been really great with helping us with that follow-through.

The varied experiences and perspectives from participants' voices can be refreshing, but it is great to hear the different ideas administrators have used to connect with teachers, staff, and students.

The Special Education teacher participants provided detailed information focused on the school's theme and the central office's responsiveness. They needed their administrators to build on communication, trust, and rapport. They each brought different perspectives, with distinct experiences and backgrounds well-suited to supporting high-needs students.

**Theme 5: Listen to teacher perspectives and adapt support** is broken down into two categories. Support for teachers focuses on the resources and support available to them and their schools. See Table 7.

**Table 7***Research Question 2 Coding Scheme Theme 5*

Theme	Category	Codes
Listen to teacher's perspectives and adapt your support accordingly.	Support for Teachers	1. Resources 2. Teacher supports 3. School Supports
	Teacher perspectives on support	1. Protect ourselves 2. Every day is a new day 3. Feel defeated

Eight participants discussed the resources they found that are currently available or unavailable for use in their classrooms. During the focus group, Sarah shared that she has to purchase books on her own so her students can access the curriculum. "I am a self-contained high school teacher, and I have to teach Hamlet to students who are reading at a kindergarten level. So that is pretty funky. I just spent \$130.00 of my own money on picture books." Linda also contributed her thoughts on not having the curriculum resources to be successful:

One thing that always comes to my mind is that. How we have to stick to the curriculum, I would like a little clarity on that. I am always trying to stay on the curriculum. At my own expense, when you know the kids are still learning and engaged...As far as curriculum, I would have liked to have more help in the beginning with the curriculum.

Additionally, Robert shares what he would like to do with the curriculum so that all students are able to access:

I would love to sit down and just modify so that when brand new SPED teachers are like, what do I do? What does this mean? They can be like; here is the General education version, and here is the sentence starter version. Here's the chunked version. Here is the other version with lines. Here is the whatever, you know?

So that is my dream. job. I think that would be fun. I would totally do it. I would even take the stuff that the science teacher is teaching this year and modify it, and just here you go. All the Special Education teachers use it all.

Each participant shared their thoughts on the resources they use and how they use them with their students. Students require individualized instruction to meet their unique needs and achieve success.

Teacher supports are intended to help teachers feel that administrators will support them in their work with high-needs students. Diana starts strong with her views on the supports that are available to teachers:

I think a lot of it is, too. You get a lot of teachers who get very burnt out because there is, you know, and once again, that has a lot to do with administrators that do not have much experience working with special needs students... just acknowledging us...As far as giving us support or praise, like Mrs. G, you know, I noticed that you did XY and Z with this student. You know, that was really good.

Meanwhile, Eva prefers to handle her own classroom problems without the support of the administrators:

A few teachers agree with how I am handling things in my room.

Some of them copy some of the things that I do in my room, and then some of

They do not; they do not know how to handle what is happening.

Looking at the support schools can offer teachers to make them feel supported, eight participants shared their thoughts. Sarah believes that the school should let teachers teach their students how they feel they need to be taught, stating: "Let us teach the curriculum at our own pace, and give

us the modified and adaptive materials that we need to make sure that our students get access to the curriculum in the way that they understand.” Nicholas referenced the support he received when he was struggling with a science reporting task. “She came right into my room and sat down with me and helped me with my lab. I was doing something wrong with my lab minutes on Infinite Campus.” Linda added that, on the other hand, she does not feel supported. “I do not feel like I get much support. I feel like all of us in the special classes do not get much support.” Each teacher has their own feelings regarding support. It can vary from school to school. It also varies from administrator to administrator, especially when multiple administrators are present in a single building. School support varies from day to day and changes with the leadership, which is often dependent on the district's initiatives and priorities.

Taking the data collection further, looking directly at the data collected from the perspectives of Special Education teachers. Five participants discussed how best to protect themselves in the classroom. Diana was one of the first participants to raise the concept of self-protection. “My focus is, you know, on the students, but also on the teachers, and how we can protect ourselves?” Eva shared similar feelings during her interview about the difficulty of working with students each day: “It is a struggle for a lot of the colleagues here.” Sarah revealed a dismal situation that she had to get out of, as she was not supported:

I did not receive any support from the administrators. I will be honest with you.

That is another reason why I left. I will just tell you the truth. The reason that I left is because I had an aide in my classroom who was constantly under the influence of drugs and alcohol at work and would drink at work in his Yeti cup. I went to the administrators and said, 'This is a safety concern, this is a liability issue.' I've spoken to him. I am not comfortable with having someone who is under the influence of drugs

and alcohol working with the most vulnerable students in the district. I was told it is teachers like you who make my job harder.

The experiences participants shared about protecting themselves were not the most positive or upbeat. The teachers were able to share their previous experiences during the interview.

Maria and one other teacher provide a more positive perspective, along with two administrators, “Every day is a new day.” With this more upbeat sentiment, Nicholas continued on to share his view:

Every year, really every day, can be a totally new day for a kid. You know, with the I kids, I have now one little thing can change your whole day, can change your whole week. It has always been like that for me, right? I always tell new teachers, 'don't expect.' Your success on one day, always to carry over to the next...Always be ready to be surprised or disappointed on some level because you do not know what happens between. Starting and ending the day with his mantra could help support high-needs students and the teachers who work with them daily.

Moving back toward the negative side, five participants who supported the idea shared the feeling of defeat. Diana was straightforward and to the point regarding this: “[As] Special Education teachers, we do feel very defeated.” Eva additionally shared the sentiment regarding the feeling of being defeated, “There are times when I get emails, but I am not put on any particular training. So, it is like I feel like we are forgotten.” Robert also shared a time when he was utterly defeated and broke down due to the lack of support:

I got admin support for one day. They were I because I went down to the office because I could not. Once I started, I just started rage-crying, and I could not stop.

So, I went from my room down to the office, and I had all three administrators in front of

me, and they were just looking at me. I could not control what came out of my mouth at that point because I was so angry, because they just looked at me like, what is wrong? I need help because what I am doing is not working. I am doing everything that you are asking me to do, and it is not working.

The data collection process has begun, uncovering the daily obstacles that comprise teacher life and the challenges participants face when working with high-needs students, both the positive and negative aspects.

### ***Research Question 3***

Research question 3 was designed to collect data from sitting building-level administrators regarding their perspectives and thoughts on supporting teachers assigned to high-needs classrooms. Research has shown that administrators may lack the knowledge or training to effectively support high-needs students and their teachers. Two themes emerged during the data analysis. The first theme was that administrators need support, shared accountability, and two-way communication to be successful. Theme two determined that administrators need access to training and resources to be successful.

**Theme 6: Administrators need support, shared accountability, and two-way communication to be successful.** Switching gears to now focus more on what administrators are saying that they are seeing, experiencing, and feeling. Administrators are often juggling many hats, not only overseeing the safety of everyone in the building but also serving as instructional leaders. Such leaders are supposed to have answers for everything. High accountability is also at the forefront, ensuring teachers and students are doing their best to achieve success. The stakes are even higher with the increase in high-needs students being assigned to buildings. See Table 8.

**Table 8***Research Question 3 Coding Scheme Theme 6*

Theme	Category	Codes
Administrators need support and shared accountability	Shared Accountability	1. Consistency 2. Equity 3. Accountability
	Adequate Staffing	1. Paraprofessionals 2. Staffing concerns 3. New teachers 4. Burnout
	Administrator Supports Needed	1. Administrators- support available 2. Administrators- learning about special education 3. Administrators- Teacher supports needed

The first category discussed is shared accountability, considering the increased pressures that teachers and administrators are experiencing. Consistency was discussed by six participants across the interviews and the focus group. Teachers discussed the need for consistency for their own sake and for the students'. Sarah shared her wish that the administrators were consistent in how they treated suspensions with students:

There are certain students who get suspended for doing silly things and other students who do more, I am going to say egregious things, who do not get suspended... There are a few students who... are on the radar of the admin who wander the building, hall walks, skip classes, and get written up constantly for doing things and they do not get suspended. They will have a parent conference in lieu of suspension. Then we have some other students who are constantly chronically, and I say on vacation, you know, for a five-day vacation, they come back, and they have another one.

Forrest, on the other hand, tries to take the side of administrators as he somewhat understands what they are facing as they make decisions:

I feel like consistency, and I feel like the district has so many rules and regulations that they put on administrators, that even if the administrator wanted to do ABC, they couldn't because the district puts XYZ on them.

Do you know what I mean? I feel like the administrators need some freedom to run their building without worrying about, Oh, your data is going to look bad if you suspend too many kids, and oh, you have who cares.

Meanwhile, Robert takes the district on, trying to understand the rationalization behind district decisions:

The district itself, though, is responsible for this, their own mess, because there is no accountability for the kids. They do not fail kids because especially In junior high, you did not perform very well here. You failed. Let us go to summer school. Oh, you failed summer school. No problem. Go to the next grade, and then they are awful in the next grade.

The teacher participants shared their frustration with the inconsistency, rather than the consistency, in decisions made at both the building and district levels.

Equity was another topic that arose when examining the accountability administrators and teachers face when dealing with high-needs students in the classroom. Six participants discussed this topic during their individual interviews or in the focus group. There are differences in buildings and experiences, such as in leadership, resources, opportunities, or the lack thereof. Maria begins by discussing her thoughts on assigning unqualified staff to classes: “Assigning inexperienced staff to demanding programs undermines the program quality and

disrupts continuity.” Linda shared her thoughts regarding equity and the fact that Special Education teachers do not always get the support that they need to be successful:

Why don't we meet as special Ed with our principals? I just think that is a big thing. I have always thought that was missing. I do not mean all the time, but just to get an idea of what is what, what are, what are the best used practices? What are some things that you have done? Let us get these written down and maybe a little handbook, I do not know. Do not ask me to do it, because I have always wanted to make a little handbook. But I think something like that would have been very helpful to me, you know, and obviously, preface that if it is not in here, it does not mean it is not important. I just feel like a lack of understanding. We are just here, handling the behavior of the kids, and just do it, do it, and kind of stay quiet.

Additionally, Robert spoke about equity directly to the students, where the district failed to follow through:

I will say that the summer people dropped the ball this year. Absolutely. Because any Student intervention response packet that was put in place in June, so that the meetings would be held over the summer, so that the kids would move into the proper placement, did not happen.

Equity for teachers, students, and families should be considered and implemented to ensure follow-through for everyone. Equity and consistency can be challenging, as individuals and situations are unique and varied.

Consistency and equity lead up to accountability. Throughout the interviews and focus groups, participants shared their varied views on the topic under study. Regarding accountability,

seven participants were willing to share their experiences and perspectives during both the focus group and individual interviews. Diana contributed more to the topic, sharing her thoughts on accountability with the building administrators:

Holding students accountable. What that looks like is different from building to building, following the code of conduct for some, while not following the code of conduct for all students...learning to de-escalate rather than pulling the kids out of the classroom, letting them play...then putting them back in the classroom. It puts a lot of strain on the teachers...increases behaviors because then they want to be out of the classroom.

Eva shared her many thoughts on what is and is not happening within her school regarding accountability for students and administrators, along with her personal grievances.

They let certain things slide, and then the teachers are left to do the consequences within their rooms. And then when it doesn't, when it does not flow to the next teacher or the next class or special or wherever else, then it falls.

Participants' perspectives vary depending on their experience, and they equate the information they shared regarding their thoughts on shared accountability with consistency, equity, and accountability at the building and district levels.

Adequate staffing is the second category within this theme. Without staffing, even adequate staffing, administrators are at a loss. The need for qualified, dedicated staff can make or break a building, as everyone has a breaking point. Paraprofessionals play a crucial role, particularly when working with high-needs students and their classrooms. A paraprofessional is often part of the classroom makeup per the regulations. The regulation surrounding qualification or training, however, does not exist; eight of the participants contributed to this portion of the

data collection, with some more positive than others. Diana shared her view on paraprofessionals in the classroom:

Having a clear understanding of what a teacher assistant is versus what an aide is is versus what their role in the classroom is...that can get them burnt out as well. And in my type of setting, there is a lot of inconsistency, where you have a lot of staff floating around... I do not necessarily know that when these [paraprofessional], even get training.

Eva disclosed that when she had her first aide in the classroom, she did not even know what to do, as she never received training on how to manage another adult in her room:

I've never had an aide. It was kind of like that learning process for me.

It was also for her, but she was with those students for so long. So, she knew her job. She knew what she needed to do for them. I learned from her, she learned from me, and we learned together certain things.

On the other hand, Forrest has a unique response regarding how positive and rewarding it is to work with the same aide since she started in the district:

I think I am not a fair example because I have been fortunate enough. I have had the same aide since day one. She has moved with me, and we have made an amazing team. But I would say at least I can speak for my building. I think that the aides are wonderful. I think that they are the hardest working on the teams, and I think that they really make the classroom work.

The perspectives truly do vary from building to building and person to person. It is about the relationships that are built. Six of the participants noted that paraprofessionals require training to

be effective in the classroom. Maria effectively stated, “Untrained professional aides negatively affect classroom management and instructional delivery.”

Moving on to staffing concerns, especially in high-needs classrooms. Six participants discussed staffing concerns at both the building and district levels. Both the Special Education teachers and building administrators provided feedback on staffing concerns. Sebastian stated in his response regarding hiring more staff, “More Human Resources. These students are aggressive and wildly impulsive. They hurt students and staff. They need more people helping in these classrooms.” Meanwhile, Principal Alex had a clearer-cut response to staffing concerns for high-needs students. “We have a shortage of teachers for special education, and we need to make sure that are safe (more hands to cover breaks) and more mentors that can actually stay with them as they start their careers.” Maria had a lot to say regarding staffing concerns:

Assigning inexperienced staff to demanding programs undermines program quality and disrupts continuity. Retention and placement issues cause instability in Special Education, affecting consistent student support.

Linda provided a clear view from both sides:

Every administrator that I have had an experience with says I do not know what to do because we just do not have enough bodies. So, the bigger problem is that we do not have enough people to pull from.

As we can see, there are perspectives from both building administrators and Special Education teachers regarding staffing in high-needs classrooms.

For new teachers, the age-old question remains: What do they need, and how can they be supported? Throughout the study, five Special Education teachers and five administrators shared

their perspectives on the topic. Whitney shared a holistic view of Special Education teachers and what they need:

A lot of Special Education teachers seem to struggle to support students using effective and structured classrooms for behavioral management, they get frustrated easily due to a lack of knowledge in all the content areas, which leads to a lot of wasted time and behavioral issues.

Sebastian shared his advice for Special Education teachers: “You have to start every new day fresh. Take what you learned from yesterday, reflect, and adjust your approach and lessons. Be reflective, resilient, and creative.” Diana shared her thoughts on support for new teachers, as she, too, started at Buffalo with little support. “Knowing that you are walking into that type of setting and then not having it and even possible, even having a coach or even a veteran teacher to come in and even model, you know, and give them that support.” There is no one right way to provide support, or even to know what every teacher needs, because they all come with different experiences. Both the Principals and the Special Education teachers had great insight to support Special Education teachers of all levels.

Burnout is a real phenomenon that affects not only teachers but also administrators. Providing support and resources could be helpful, as evidenced by participants' shared experiences. Five of the Special Education teachers provided feedback regarding burnout. Sarah shared her perspective on teacher burnout:

Maybe that is why they burn out and leave because they do not know any better. These students should not be in your room. They are violent, they are disruptive. They are bringing everybody down. Because they are in the wrong placement, they are having task avoidance behaviors that throw your life into turmoil, but

You do not know what to do.

Additionally, Maria continues to add to the discussion about burnout:

Placing staff in year-round programs without assessing readiness causes burnout and increases turnover rates...Insufficient breaks between summer and school responsibilities reduce morale and negatively affect staff performance.

Burnout is a real thing that all can experience. Looking at it through the lens of adequate staffing helps address concerns with paraprofessionals, staffing issues, and the integration of new teachers.

The next category to be examined is the support that administrators require. Yes, even administrators need support. Often, ineffective support results in a trickle-down effect on the staff in the building. Looking at the support available to administrators, nine of the building-level administrators shared their input. Alisa provided her insight into the support that the special education department provides:

The Special Education department will provide professional development; however, many aides/assistants and teachers have the choice to not attend by taking the day off. When the professional development is offered during the school day, teachers/aides/and assistants will attend, but at the detriment of the students.

Additionally, Diane provides more specific information about the available support. "We have a high-functioning SST to provide support/resources, a fully staffed nursing clinic with four nurses, personal nurses for students, Support from our comprehensive therapy program providers (physical therapists, occupational therapists, vision teachers, hearing impaired teachers, ENL, Speech, and Mobility."

Alex took this topic to heart and shared his whole view on the supports:

We have a few district teachers on special assignments two for a district with 50 elementary schools and 25-30% special education populations in each building that come and work with teachers if they can. We have crash mats, sensory tools, and toileting supplies.

As the data shows, there are varying opinions on whether support is available from the building administrators.

Questions are then asked about administrators, how they learned about special education, and what resources are available to them. All ten administrators provided feedback on how they became knowledgeable about special education practices. Only three of the administrators stated that they received coursework on special education during their college coursework. The others learned from on-the-job training and personal experiences. Alex shared that he learned and continues to learn about special education practices. “Hands-on experience is one way I have learned, and I learn from my social workers and school psychologists.” Griffin additionally shared that he continues to learn on his own through: “Research articles, families, podcasts, and the Special Education Department.” These administrators shared different ways to continue learning and staying up to date with best practices to remain relevant in supporting teachers and staff.

Administrators continue to need support and ideas for sharing with their teachers. Ten participants shared information on the support needed for teachers. Alex shared his thoughts on what teachers need:

We need more hands/ The students need so much attention; they elope, throw things, refuse to follow directions, scream, run around the room—we need the ratio to change from 6:1:1 to 6:1:2 and from 8:1:1 to 8:1:2, etc. Our students in

integrated rooms need to be appropriately placed. Teachers need to be trained to restrain students.

Alisa provides excellent insight into what support is needed in order to start tackling the issue with high-needs students:

Extra time prior to the school year beginning to allow for them to process the excessive amount of paperwork they read and are responsible for producing. This is a day when students stay home, and teachers are mandated to come in to get training that is individualized to their specific students who are in the classroom currently. I would also believe that the State law that is preventing Special Education teachers from teaching 7 - 12 in special classes without content certification -- this has been detrimental to our students' ability to have certified staff in front of them. Support that is individualized. Less movement through multiple grades. More parental involvement in student accountability.

The list of support needed for teachers and possibly administrators is endless. The participants shared great ideas regarding what they see as the support their teachers need.

Administrative support is just as critical as teacher support. Participants shared their perspectives from their experience and buildings. Administrators require ongoing education, support for sharing, and shared accountability to lead students and staff effectively.

**Theme 7: Administrators need access to training and resources to be successful.** This theme was chosen based on the data to support Research question 3, focusing on administrators' need for training to ensure their own success and that of their teachers. Training is supportive, as it provides strategies, especially for administrators. See Table 9.

**Table 9***Research Question 3 Coding Scheme Theme 7*

Theme	Category	Codes
Administrators need access to training and resources to be successful	Administrator- strategies for teacher support	1. Administrator support 2. Administrative strategies
	Administrator- Special Education Experience	1. Administrator- special education coursework 2. Administrator- experience 3. Administrator without special education experience

The first category in this theme, Administrator Strategies for Teacher Support, is helpful because it enables administrators to provide the resources and ideas teachers need when they are struggling. Administrator support was addressed by six of the Special Education teacher participants, both in individual interviews and in the focus group. The teachers provided insight into their experiences with administrators' support. Linda shared one experience that she had:

Just more understanding that we are doing a job with a child who has different needs than the general public. I feel like I have been doing this for a long time. The support I would like would be to support me in front of the student because that that is a big, that is a big thing. Like when that principal screamed at my kids, and the kids were just so upset, I had to end up, you know, coddling them. I want support and understanding.

Sarah shared a more positive experience of problem-solving with her administrator:

They problem-solve with me. They take care of things right away. If I have a student that's being disruptive and verbally abusive, they are gone. Then we figure out the consequences and how to integrate that kid back into my room.

Diana added her thoughts on administrator support:

Support and that means involving the whole team, not just the teacher, but the counselor, maybe the therapists who are working. They see our children just as much. And I think having them involved in those meetings are important, as well as the parents having maybe more admin visits, having the administrator come to our class.

Support looks different in different settings and should be tailored to each person. What works for one teacher may not always work for another teacher or a different student.

Continuing with the concepts of administrator support, administrative strategies were examined. Nine of the Special Education teacher participants contributed further to the discussion. Eva and her special education experience, along with working with various administrators during her career, had a lot of ideas to share:

The principal was very supportive of everything that we did. They really found ways to kind of help. They did grade-level meetings where whatever was being taught in the district, they would bring to us, and we would do grade-level [meetings] where we actually learned something, and we could bring it into the classroom...They included all the students. It was never about separating students. They were always visible. They made sure that they built relationships with the kids. Those were very helpful. Faculty meetings were conducted in the same manner.

Diana provided many different strategies and ideas for administrators with her time in various buildings throughout the district:

Celebrating our students' success because we do well at that, but really celebrating staff success, you know? makes a difference when you can have

the same, you know, two people working together, having more time to do paperwork. That was another thing that I could have had administrators support me on, having a strong parent-teacher family partnership. Understanding the needs of our students and the consistency with the staff is something that I would love administrators to consider.

Administrators need ideas and strategies to support their teachers and students; Special Education teachers have the experience and expertise to provide these. These participants shared a variety of strategies that could be useful in helping administrators, teachers, and support staff.

This study continues to focus on administrators' experiences in special education. Encompassing various aspects, including administrative background, concerns, and experiences. All administrators provided feedback on coursework they completed during their certification programs. The data collected showed that all administrators took at least one special education course during their college years. Meanwhile, only six had to take a course during their administrative program.

All the administrators shared their teaching experience by completing the questionnaire; their experience spanned several years and subjects. Six of the administrators reported having six to ten years of experience. Two had one to five years of teaching experience, and the remainder had taught for 11-15 years before becoming administrators. One teacher's experience led six of them to state that they had prior special education experience before becoming an administrator. Only one of them reported having worked with students with autism prior to becoming an administrator. The administrators' experiences vary widely, and they are often assigned to buildings with high percentages of special education classrooms, including high-needs classrooms.

Administrators with little to no experience with students with high needs, such as autism, can be a disadvantage, as they have trouble communicating and understanding strategies to support both the teacher and the students, leading to concerns among administrators and their inability to provide effective support. Five of the Special Education teacher participants questioned the administrators' knowledge in the focus group and individual interviews. Linda shared her perspective:

The only thing, the one thing that sticks out in my mind is I do not know how much the administrators get training on special education. Do they understand? I mean, do they understand the difference between an intellectual disability versus, you know, other impairment that may include, I do not know, there is a list of things, but then when you have behavior, and what exactly does it mean? I don't understand. I always feel like they should know, but they do not. They really, in my in my opinion, do not understand the difference of special education the way they should support us.

Diana added in her thoughts:

I think the biggest thing is that some of our admins do not necessarily have the experience working with our population. And I think that, you know, they need to take what we see, take what we say into account. We work with these kids on a daily basis. We need; we know what they need. We know what their triggers are. We know how, you know. To be more proactive than reactive. But then these administrators come in, you know, and sometimes they make you feel like it is your fault.

Then, of course, we have the individual administrators' thoughts on their experiences. Alisa shared information about her first year and how she learned about special education strategies:

First year of teaching - had students with high emotional needs. One of them sometimes became explosive in the classroom during the lesson. It was my first real exposure to the district schools and special education students...I had a fantastic AP who was great at her previous job. She forced me to learn the behavior side of the house, which forced me to learn the Special education side of the house. I continue to learn by asking a lot of questions when I do not understand something and thinking about the kids and what is best for them.

There are many sides to consider, whether administrators truly have the necessary experience or not. Some may disclose, while others may not even be aware of what they do not know.

Experience can be evaluated at different levels, especially in terms of what they are exposed to.

### **Evaluation of the Outcomes**

During the evaluation of the study's findings, many takeaways emerged regarding participants' perceptions and experiences with administrator support for high-needs students and classrooms. The conceptual framework by Billingsley (2004), Four Themes for Special Educators' Retention and Attrition, served as a foundation for the case study. Each finding from participant perceptions yielded several key takeaways for administrators on how to support teachers in high-needs classrooms. Through individual interviews, a focus group, and collected questionnaires, participants shared their personal and professional experiences related to supporting Special Education teachers.

**Research Question 1: What are Special Education teachers' perspectives on instructional supports needed for high-needs students to succeed?**

In theme one, "Teachers Need Collaboration, Experience, Communication, and Family Involvement for Student Success," the focus was on the participants and what they shared throughout the interview and focus group. The participants shared their perspectives on communication, family involvement, and their school experiences. The main finding is that communication, relationship-building, and collaboration among teachers, staff, and families are crucial for supporting teachers. Within the findings, the participants indicated that, despite their education and backgrounds, they require clear communication and collaboration from the various stakeholders to support high-needs students with disabilities. Aligning the conclusion with Rodgers' (2021) research, which indicated that Special Education teachers, along with other service providers, need the ability to collaborate to ensure students' needs are met. Bringing together the cited study, along with the current study, and Billingsley's (2004) framework, communication and collaboration are essential for teachers to be successful in high-needs classrooms. The information provides further evidence that Special Education teachers need opportunities, self-initiated or district-initiated, to refine the best ways to communicate, build relationships, and collaborate, thereby honing their skills for students.

Theme 2 from the study was identified as training, which must be purposeful and support instruction. The finding suggests that, for professional development and training to be effective, they must be designed to meet the needs of teachers and their students. This theme highlighted the participants' views on the training they have attended versus what they truly need to support them. Too often, they reported that the training was not relevant or easily accessible. The participants shared their perspectives on specialized training, Special Education teachers, and professional development, expressing the need for Special Education teachers to have opportunities to share and connect with colleagues from across the district, thereby enhancing

their professional growth. This conclusion is in alignment with Sowerby's (2023) and Jackson and Parker's (2023) research that Special Education teachers do not often get access to the support they need or the resources that contribute to high levels of stress, along with a negative attitude toward teaching, administrators, and, at times, the school where they work. In Billingsley's (2004) conceptual framework, the first and third themes are similarly accounted for as the two themes of teacher characteristics and teachers' affective reactions to work. While not all professional development is necessary for everyone, creating a culture where all educators can easily access training would be beneficial.

**Research Question 2: What are Special Education teachers' perspectives on how administrators can provide resources to support teachers in high-needs classrooms?**

Theme one for this question focused on specialized support for high-needs special education students, targeting students with disabilities and addressing their specific educational needs. Participants discussed and shared their perspectives on the support that teachers and students need to be successful, including behaviors, attendance, and learned helplessness. The findings revealed that there are increases in student and teacher difficulties due to the increase in high-needs students with disabilities in district schools, including those with behavioral, medical, and intellectual needs. The participants, both Special Education teachers and the building administrators, went into detail discussing their students, experiences, and their love of teaching. This conclusion supports Jackson and Parker's (2023) research on the challenges that teachers face with high-needs students, which are exacerbated in the absence of administrative knowledge or support. Woulfin and Jones (2021) expanded on this by discussing the gaps that remain in student achievement, special education services, and strategies. The study's findings, along with the cited work, align with Billingsley's (2004) conceptual theory regarding three of its tenets:

teacher characteristics, work environment, and teacher affective reactions towards the work. These elements all lead to the acknowledgment that Special Education teachers need prioritized support to determine the best ways to educate and meet the needs of the growing, high-need student population.

Theme two, school and district office responsiveness, is needed to gain trust and build rapport. The participants discussed the lack of time to complete all their paperwork and lesson plans, as well as to attend meetings. They also discussed in depth their experience, both positive and negative, with administrators throughout their tenure in the education sector. The main finding in the second theme for question number two is a strong need for support from school and district offices to provide comprehensive support for Special Education teachers. The participants were very vocal about the topics related to the theme, making it clear that they feel overworked, underappreciated, and unsupported for all they have to accomplish each day. This conclusion aligns with Owens and Hudson's (2021) discussion of the impact on teachers, districts, and overall accountability based on performance factors. Theobald et al.'s (2021) research also highlighted the need for policy and practice changes to support teachers and attract more individuals to education. These studies, along with the current study, align with all four of Billingsley's (2004) themes. Awareness of these issues is of utmost importance to limit Special Education teacher attrition by increasing their involvement and commitment to the field.

The last theme for Research question 2 is to "listen to teacher perspectives and adapt support." Participants discussed their experiences and perspectives on the resources and support they need to continue to survive and thrive each day in the classroom. The main findings for the theme under question number two are that administrators need to listen to what the teachers are saying and adapt support to meet their needs. The participants shared creative approaches to

supporting students to the best of their ability, from purchasing their own materials to developing their own curriculum, and also shared their personal classroom experiences. This aligns with research by Gilmour and Sandilos (2023) and Bettini (2024) on the role administrators play in shaping school culture and on the need for administrators to be knowledgeable about what teachers and students need to be successful. While these align with the study's findings by connecting the conceptual frame's themes to administrators, this is an area Billingsley (2004) does not explicitly address. The importance of this finding demands attention, as administrators are the ones leading buildings and need to be able to support teachers and students.

**Research Question 3: What are administrators' perspectives on what resources they need to effectively support teachers in high-needs classrooms?**

Theme one: Administrators need support and accountability. Participants were mainly building-based administrators who shared perspectives on staffing, teacher support, burnout, and communication needs. The main finding for this theme is that administrators need support and accountability. The participants, both Special Education teachers and building-level administrators, shared perspectives that led administrators to need support; they often lack the resources to effectively support teachers or students with high-need disabilities. In addition, Walker et al. (2024) and Grobart and Zepp (2024) discussed the need for high-quality teacher preparation programs to equip teachers with practical strategies and high-quality pre-service training. Billingsley (2004) and Hammond and Carver-Thomas (2019) highlighted the teacher shortage, along with the concerns about the balance between supply and demand of Special Education teachers. In contrast, there was limited information on administrative preparation programs and on their examination; the outcomes are a key piece missing. Inclusion of these

ideas in planning support for both administrators and Special Education teachers is a critical downfall that needs to be addressed (Billingsley, 2004).

The final theme explored in this research study was the administrators' need for access to training and resources to achieve success. Participants in the questionnaire reported needing additional support, especially regarding special education knowledge. The key finding highlights the need for administrators to receive support, training, and strategies to effectively support high-needs teachers. Building-level administrators who participated in the study revealed that they lack the knowledge and experience necessary to support teachers and students in high-needs students, such as students with autism. Jackson and Parker (2023) and Shaheen and Bacher-Hicks (2024) reported that Special Education teachers often feel unsupported and overworked, leading to teacher discontent and a lack of confidence needed to support students with high-needs disabilities. Park and Shin's (2020) research suggests that district offices play a crucial role in implementing special education practices and providing support. Meanwhile, Billingsley (2004) and Jackson and Parker (2023) have demonstrated through their research that building-level administrators are often left to enforce these, often without implementation support. The divergence from this study's findings is that administrators often lack the knowledge to support teachers and students in high-needs settings. There is a strong need to address the aspect of administrator support, as they should have the tools they need to support Special Education teachers, students, and their families.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Practice**

The findings from this qualitative descriptive case study helped to develop seven implications, derived from the themes and research questions, which led to recommendations for practice. The three research questions and seven themes led to the seven implications. The

implications align with the research purpose, which focuses on participants' perceptions and experiences. The research study focused on determining Special Education teachers' perceptions of administrators' support for high-needs classrooms. This revealed a greater need for support from both district- and building-level administrators to be successful in the classroom. The study's implications suggest that participants' varied experiences influenced what they shared during data collection, and that perceptions from working in a large school district with over 50 schools can lead to experiences that are both similar and distinct. The findings exemplify the participants' perceptions of teaching in high-needs classrooms and how administrators can support teachers to achieve success. The four themes, which stem from Billingsley's (2004) framework, align with the data collected from participants: teacher and student characteristics; strategies and support; the work environment; and how teachers perceive their workplace. The following implications provide further context on the data collected from the participant, the cited research aligns with or diverges from the data, and recommendations for future research and practice.

The first finding suggests that communication, relationship-building, and collaboration among teachers, staff, and families are crucial for supporting teachers. Special Education teachers need more collaboration and communication to meet the needs of high-needs students. Participants shared their unique perspectives and distinct experiences to reach this conclusion. Despite participants bringing their own views and experiences, it was clear that, to support students' success, collaboration, teaching experience, effective communication, and family involvement were essential. Including this finding, along with the study from Jackson and Parker (2023), exemplifies the importance of working together in a team format, bringing in all stakeholders, including families, to be responsible for creating a holistic support system for

students and their families. Han and Cummings (2022) further discuss the importance of Special Education teachers' beliefs for student success. which was exemplified in the research-focus group, it was obvious that the teachers do care, and students' success or failure can be linked to how they teach, shaped by their intrinsic beliefs and experiences in their work environments. Collaboration and communication among teachers, staff, administrators, and families help develop a holistic model that enables students to benefit from the team approach (Hammond & Carver-Thomas, 2019). Elliott et al. (2023) said that teaching is one of the most stressful jobs; stress levels can impact performance, work, and student achievement. Based on the findings of the current study and the cited works, when teachers work in silos, it can create feelings of loneliness, resentment, and higher stress levels, especially when working with high-needs students.

Implementing clear communication and collaboration is essential; however, teachers are still unable to reap the benefits. A strong focus on districts and school buildings to implement systems that enable teachers to easily identify the needs of administrators, colleagues, and families must be put into practice. Special Education teacher burnout is a genuine concern; administrators must remain attuned to their teachers' needs and provide them with adequate support for growth (Sancar et al., 2021). Without the support and trust of colleagues, collaboration and support are lost, leaving teachers to feel they are to blame for the academic and behavioral challenges their students face (Toman & Maag, 2024). Without clear guidance from both building-level administrators and district leaders, their work is marked by greater challenges (Sowerby, 2023; Park & Shin, 2020). The participants made it very apparent that they feel overworked, underappreciated, and unsupported in the work they must accomplish each day. Schools need to determine the most effective ways to support teachers, despite the demanding

day-to-day tasks they must accomplish. Stark and Kosloski (2022) found that when educators do not receive the support they need, including support for managing their own social-emotional needs, they are often unsuccessful. In contrast, Herman et al. (2020) stated that little research has been done to understand the best ways to support what teachers endure each day. Therefore, further research is needed to determine best practices for supporting teachers beyond current support, focusing on morale-boosting practices, enhancing communication, collaboration, and the sharing of experiences across district buildings.

The second finding suggests that professional development and training must meet the needs of teachers and their students to be effective. It is not easy to expect anyone to have all the answers. Ongoing, relevant training is needed and should be easily accessible. This applies not only to Special Education teachers but also to support staff, administrators, bus drivers, food service personnel, and even families (Owens & Hudson, 2017; Stark & Kosloski, 2022). The participants shared unique and creative approaches to supporting students to the best of their ability, from purchasing their own materials to developing their own curriculum, as they feel it is not always appropriate or relevant for their students. Knowledge truly is power, especially when working with students who present challenges. To effectively support special educators of high-needs students, administrators must fully recognize what is needed and why. The participant findings regarding additional support, resources, and training are consistent with the research results. Training for Special Education teachers should be conducted purposefully at the building and district levels to meet the needs of both teachers and students and promote growth (Sancar et al., 2021). Purposeful training is essential to ensure teachers and staff have access to the latest strategies, resources, and regulations necessary to perform their jobs effectively (Hammond & Carver-Thomas, 2019). Training, access to resources, and updated knowledge help teachers feel

connected and supported, empowering them to design effective instruction tailored to their students' needs (Stark & Kosloski, 2022). In the district of study, each building is slightly different, yet some trainings need to be conducted at the district level. The district and building training should be designed to meet the needs of both teachers and students. Based on this study, along with the work of Stark and Kosloski (2022), Special Education teachers working with high-needs students need a support system, an easy-to-access resource that they can turn to in order to get support for instruction, teaching strategies, behavior, learning, and medical supports (Tristani & Bassett-Gunter, 2020). Therefore, a recommendation for future practice would be for the district to improve its professional development systems and processes. Determining effective ways to meet teacher, administrator, and support staff needs, so they know how to provide the best possible support to students and families.

Based on the gaps identified in this study, as well as those identified by Stark and Kosloski (2022) and Tristani and Bassett-Gunter (2020), the district needs to improve its professional development systems and processes to meet the needs of teachers, administrators, and support staff. To effectively support special educators of high-needs students, administrators must fully recognize what is needed and why, and be willing to admit they do not have a deep understanding of it. The ability to provide purposeful, helpful, and easy-to-digest training would be beneficial. Topics such as special education basics, supporting students, evaluating teachers, and, most importantly, supporting teachers in high-needs classrooms (Sancar et al., 2021; Meaghan et al., 2024; Toman & Maag, 2024). Too often, administrators, who have numerous other responsibilities, overlook training, relegating it to the background, especially when new students are assigned to the buildings. Development of an online training system, where teachers can connect with other teachers teaching the same type of classes, and students would also be

beneficial, so that lesson plans, strategies, and ideas can be shared, and students can bounce ideas off one another.

The third finding revealed that there are increases in student and teacher difficulties due to the increase in high-needs students with disabilities in district schools, including those with behavioral, medical, and intellectual needs. There continues to be a need for support at all levels for students with high needs. Special Education teachers do not always have all the answers; there are often deep issues that require addressing at the district and community levels (Jackson & Parker, 2023). The participants went into detail, discussing their students, experiences, the positives and negatives, and their passion for teaching. Special Education teachers shared their problem-solving strategies, along with sleuthing additional ways to support their students, regardless of the issues. There are many issues that students encounter at all levels, especially those who are well into high school and still are unable to read. Without support from the building and district levels, teachers are left to fight alone (Jackson & Parker, 2023). Too often, issues such as reading challenges are overlooked, rather than being addressed before they escalate into larger problems. District and building-level administrators should analyze student achievement and its connection to engagement, ensuring that curriculum and programs meet students' academic and emotional needs and prepare them for the future (Jackson & Parker, 2023). At times, the basics get overlooked as students progress through school, and they get lost in the process. All it takes is one teacher to realize a student does not know something, as exemplified by the participant who discovered that her students were unaware of what a question mark was.

Students' needs and complexity appear to continue to increase; new ways to support teachers are long overdue. Students identified with autism and other high-needs diagnoses are

overwhelming school districts, and the ability to provide quality teachers, instruction, and support (Theobald et al., 2021). The 2024 Annual Disabilities Statistics Compendium and Young et al (2023) share the concerning data on the continued increases in disabilities, especially with autism. These increases in students with high-need disabilities lead to challenges for schools, especially Special Education teachers. To stay on top of these increases, Rodgers (2021) and the study participants believe that Special Education teachers and other service providers are the best solution for determining how to help students succeed. Therefore, further research is needed to investigate administrative knowledge regarding special education practices, disabilities, student support, and applicable strategies to support Special Education teachers with high-needs students.

The fourth finding focused on the issue that Special Education teachers often lack sufficient time to plan and complete special education paperwork. The participants discussed the lack of time in their day to dedicate to their students. They are often overwhelmed by daily responsibilities, as well as special education responsibilities such as data collection, IEP writing, and meetings. The participants were not lacking in including the fact that they also need to lesson plan, build in specially designed instructional resources, and accommodations for their students. The study led teachers to discuss additional responsibilities and tasks, leaving them overworked and stressed out. Blad (2024) contributed to this finding by stating that teachers are often stressed because they lack resources and support to do their jobs well, not because of the students they serve. Blad (2024) also discussed ways administrators can support teachers who face additional stressors by providing professional development and offering effective feedback. Administrators need to see what a typical day is like through the eyes of teachers and students. Understanding by thinking outside the box, their first-hand needs, and determining how they can best provide

purposeful support outcomes (Toman & Maag, 2024). A review of what is genuinely working for all students, especially in terms of curriculum, what teachers need, and how they can receive it quickly and without additional headaches. Therefore, a future recommendation for practice would be to work with district master schedulers and administrators on creative scheduling to meet the demands of teacher schedules.

Based on the gap shown in this study, along with Blad (2024) and Toman and Maag (2024), the district must work with district master schedulers and administrators to develop creative scheduling approaches to meet the demands of teacher schedules. Developing best practices for scheduling among the district's other schools would be an essential first step toward implementing future strategies. Each school has its own strategies for developing schedules; some work, others struggle. If schools can share their concerns, what is working, and what needs improvement, they could develop recommendations based on scheduling issues. Eliminating scheduling issues and allocating more time for special education meetings, planning, and implementation would benefit teachers and students by improving school culture. (Gilmour & Sandilos, 2023).

The fifth finding revealed that teachers need to feel supported and understood by administrators and other staff within the building and district. Administrators also need support; they do not have all the answers. Participants in the interviews and focus group were on both sides of the coin, recognizing that administrators are not knowledgeable about everything. Some participants shared that the administrators recognized they did not know everything; others shared that even when they knew they did not, they still acted as if they had the correct answers. Upon reviewing the data from both Special Education teachers and building-level administrators, one of the main issues often overlooked is that district and building-level administrators

frequently lack the necessary knowledge and experience to support teachers and students in high-needs classrooms. The data showed that few have had the experience or the coursework for working with students with disabilities, let alone high-needs students, such as students with autism. If building-level administrators are expected to support teachers, conduct observations, and troubleshoot behaviors, then they must also have access to training and resources so that they, too, possess the necessary knowledge. These study results, along with Owens and Hudson's (2021) discussion of the impact on teachers, districts, and overall accountability based on performance factors, raise the question of why more has not yet been done to support both Special Education teachers and administrators. Leading this concern into what Theobald et al. (2021) highlighted: the need for policy and practice changes to support teachers and attract more individuals to education. These studies, in addition to the current study, align with all four of Billingsley's (2004) themes: teacher characteristics and personal factors, teacher qualifications, work environment, and teacher affective reactions towards their work in the classroom. These four themes are interconnected in supporting teachers and in working on retention and limiting attrition among Special Education teachers. The focus is on identifying and leveraging Special Education teacher characteristics, qualifications, work environments, and reactions to their work to bolster teacher and student success. Awareness of these issues is of utmost importance to limit Special Education teacher attrition by increasing their involvement and commitment to the field. Therefore, additional research is needed to examine teacher access to relevant resources for teachers, support staff, administration, and students, to inform strategies that impact student achievement and support both student and teacher growth.

The sixth finding shows that administrators need support and accountability. Staffing is always tricky, especially in the education field. There are always considerations: qualifications,

experience, or whether we are departing from the preference for highly qualified staff. Does hiring a person with a pulse suffice? The questions revolving around human resources and administrators struggle with are accountability and maintaining full staffing. The building-level administrators addressed within the questionnaire as a whole-district problem and the need for highly qualified teachers and staff with experience. While the Special Education teachers discussed this, they noted there was a shortage of qualified support staff in their classrooms. When buildings are understaffed, it creates difficulties for everyone. There is a reason staffing is budgeted: to meet students' needs. Gilmour et al.'s (2024) research showed staffing shortages often lead to reduced access to individualized instruction for students with disabilities. Staffing shortages can also lead to other challenges, such as when special teachers leave, taking their experience and knowledge with them, which can disrupt programming and goals in their positions. Accountability and support for administrators are additional factors that contribute to administrators' success in supporting teachers. Yell and Bradley (2024) noted in their study that the Department of Education clearly states it is a district's responsibility to meet each student's needs. Understaffed schools and unqualified teachers lead to high stress levels for administrators, teachers, and students. When teachers leave during the school year, it makes other teachers consider leaving as well, reducing the effectiveness of the remaining educators and students as they try to adjust without that teacher (Gilmour et al., 2024).

In addition, the concerns about burnout and retention are real problems for buildings, districts, and the country. These factors can also lead to increased attrition, burnout, and retention issues, as noted by Billingsley (2004). Despite the day's schedule, administrators need to have a pulse on the building, be aware of personal issues among staff that may affect their performance, and understand student and classroom situations. Hammond and Carver-Thomas (2019)

discussed the positive effects of having strong, supportive school leaders, policymakers, local organizations, schools of education, and other stakeholders. Similarly, both Billingsley (2204) and Theobald et al. (2021) suggest that districts have struggled to fill classrooms and special education teaching positions for years, one of the most effective ways to decrease attrition through job satisfaction. Therefore, a recommendation for future practice at the district level is for administrators to conduct a deep dive into current student and teacher data to identify specific areas that need improvement.

Similarly, both Billingsley (2204) and Theobald et al. (2021) suggested that districts have struggled to fill classrooms and special education teaching positions for years, and one of the most effective ways to decrease attrition is through job satisfaction. There appears to be a notable gap between the knowledge assumed and the knowledge administrators actually possess, as seen in Bettini's (2024) collected data. Administrators at the district and building levels need to have conversations about data, what it is, and how to use it effectively. Too often, the word data is thrown around and given out, but just as teachers and students need to be taught how to analyze, administrators also need to be taught how to put an action plan in place. What is needed is a deep dive into current student and teacher data to identify specific areas for improvement. The data is accessible to district staff and the community; it just takes time and planning to make it meaningful to administrators (Hammond & Carver-Thomas, 2019; Gilmour et al., 2024). I would recommend reviewing data at the district level first, pulling out the key pieces, so that when presented to administrators, they do not have to spend time extrapolating or creating charts to compare trends or anomalies. They would be able to start with the analysis steps right away, leading to a plan for improvements, without getting caught up in the data-pulling process, which can be daunting. The data would be helpful in individual schools, the various departments, and

the district, as individual school findings, along with a full district report, would be generated at the conclusion of the study.

The final finding of this study highlights the need for administrators to receive support, training, and strategies to effectively support high-needs teachers. There is an inherent need for administrators to receive support, training, and strategies to effectively support high-needs teachers. All building-level administrators who participated in the study revealed they had little to no experience working with students with high-needs disabilities. Two said they had some experience working with students with disabilities through family members. This lack of experience leads to concerns; they are supposed to be the instructional leaders of the building, with the knowledge to support teachers, students, and their families. Jackson and Parker (2023) and Shaheen and Bacher-Hicks (2024) additionally reported that Special Education teachers often feel unsupported and overworked, leading to teacher discontent and a lack of confidence needed to support students with high-needs disabilities. The participants reported that they do not feel supported or that the administrators know how to help. In addition, Park and Shin's (2020) study, along with this study, discusses the role that district offices should play in determining and implementing special education practices and providing support. Meanwhile, Billingsley (2004) and Jackson and Parker (2023) have demonstrated through their research that building-level administrators are often left to enforce these, often without implementation support. The divergence from the study's findings is that administrators often lack the knowledge to support teachers, administrators, and support staff. There appears to be a gap in the research on administrative experience, as the cited studies focus on the faults of Special Education teachers. Therefore, a recommendation for future research would involve local schools of education, community organizations, recruitment agencies, and district staff, focusing on predicting and

identifying challenges, developing creative solutions, and providing additional support and resources for both administrators and teachers.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Recommendations for future research are based on the cited research, the perspectives of Special Education teachers, and those of building-level administrators. The study examined Special Education teachers' perspectives on the supports they require to teach high-needs students effectively. The study did not focus on central office support or in-depth research from building administrators, nor did it include general education teachers. Based on the three research questions and seven themes, five recommendations for future research were produced. The first is examining the sample size and whether increasing it would add to the discussion. The second recommendation is to determine best practices for supporting teachers. The third recommendation for future research is to examine administrators' knowledge base, especially regarding special education practices, and their ability to support teachers in developing best practices to share with others. A fourth recommendation for future research is to examine the resources available to teachers and all educators working with high-needs students. The fifth recommendation for future research in the study would be to examine the larger problem at hand: how to recruit and retain teachers and educators working with high-needs students.

Given the sample size, the first recommendation for future qualitative research is to use a larger group of participants and to incorporate a broader range of staff to gain a clearer understanding of what school districts can do to support those working with high-needs students. Increasing the sample size would enable the researcher to support the school community at large by informing the administration on how best to support teachers and other staff. As teachers and administrators are often bogged down with day-to-day responsibilities, one option would be to

incentivize participation with gift cards and conduct the study over the summer, when most are not overwhelmed with school responsibilities.

The second recommendation for future research is to determine best practices for supporting teachers beyond the current model, focusing on morale-boosting practices, enhanced communication and collaboration, and the sharing of experiences across district buildings (Sancar et al., 2021, and Stark & Kosloski, 2022). The gap shows that it is critical to address how to keep teachers and address student challenges in the education field to address attrition and retention issues (Toman & Maag, 2024; Sowerby, 2023). Through the Introduction of a study examining best practices, a qualitative, in-depth case study could be conducted that focuses on participants' perceptions and experiences of the district. Despite the participants being employed by the same district, they shared varied experiences from working in different buildings, by taking the time to understand the issues and concerns, both positive and negative, and by implementing strategies that helped develop best practices for supporting high-needs students. Implementing the recommendation would support building a stronger district where staff and buildings are not siloed in their work and where best practices are shared openly.

The third recommendation for future research is to investigate administrative knowledge regarding special education practices, disabilities, student support, and applicable strategies to support Special Education teachers with high-needs students. Based on the gaps identified in this study, Rodgers (2021) and Shaheen and Bacher-Hicks (2024) found that teachers want to know they are supported and feel they are supported in the right way, so they can grow in their practice, teach, and reach their students in new ways. The support and culture of a building start with the administrator, which then carries over to the staff, shaping expectations for students and staff and holding everyone accountable (Rodgers, 2021). The research study would be a mixed-

methods study, combining quantitative and qualitative measures to determine which practices are needed to support fully. The quantitative portion of the study would focus on data collection on which strategies are being used, how often, and their success rates. The qualitative portion would involve gathering teachers' firsthand perceptions and experiences of what they do in the classroom, what they still need support with, and how best to approach it for both teachers and students. The outcomes of the research would help generate a support list of best practices for teachers to use with students based on strengths and areas of weakness.

A fourth recommendation is that future research is needed to examine teacher access to relevant resources for teachers, support staff, administration, and students, to inform strategies that can impact student achievement and support both student and teacher growth. Based on the gaps identified in this study, Billingsley (2004) and Owens and Hudson (2021) found that teachers are often not given the time or resources to analyze and effectively implement strategies for their students. Support can take many forms, such as classroom visits and meetings. These do not always have to be formal; an impromptu check-in can be just as meaningful, if not more impactful, for both new and veteran teachers. Examination of policies and interventions can help address factors that lead to teacher resignation and stabilize the work environment, enabling students to achieve and resulting in qualified, dedicated teachers in the classroom (Billingsley, 2004, and Owens & Hudson, 2021). There are also ways to work in, including ensuring administrators are present in classrooms, offering morale-boosting incentives to encourage teachers and students to participate, providing rewards for staff, such as the use of the principal's parking spot, and having the principal cover a class period.

The fifth recommendation for further research would involve local schools of education, community organizations, recruitment agencies, and district staff, focusing on predicting and

identifying challenges, developing creative solutions, and providing additional support and resources. Based on the gaps identified in this study and in Billingsley (2004) and Jackson and Parker (2023), it is of utmost importance to investigate and capitalize on these gaps to continue supporting and recruiting more educators. There is a wealth of knowledge and experience in communities that needs to be shared with schools of education and school districts to determine the best ways to start making changes in the education world. There will always be children who need to be educated; we need to figure out how to remain relevant, bring new teachers into the field, and address the growing teacher shortage (Jackson & Parker, 2023; Park & Shin, 2020). To address the gaps, ideally, the study would be a qualitative study that includes these stakeholders. The recommendation would be for another researcher to conduct individual interviews with each stakeholder group, then hold focus groups with representation from each group. The research outcome would be the hope that it could be transferable to other communities and, perhaps, the country, to quickly turn educators' trajectories around.

## **Conclusions**

Section 3 comprises findings, the evaluation of outcomes, implications, and research recommendations for practice, recommendations for future research, and overall conclusions. A detailed analysis of the findings produced a rich narrative by conducting a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) of the individual interviews, the focus group, and the questionnaire. After completing the data evaluation, it enabled further analysis of the findings, their connection to how they address the problem, and the research questions, and their convergence with previous research.

The study's findings revealed that participants' perceptions of working in high-needs classrooms provided insight into the most effective ways to support Special Education teachers.

The study found that, due to the district's size and number of schools, participants' experiences differ. While the study's implications are based on participants' experiences and perceptions, the practice recommendations may help develop best practices for recruiting, retaining, and supporting current teachers of high-needs students.

The recommendations were broken down by theme, developed from participants' perceptions and findings from the cited research. Recommendations included the following: (1) Special Education teachers need more collaboration and communication to meet the needs of high-needs students. (2) Training for teachers is needed, especially purposeful and easily accessible training. (3) There is a need for support at all levels for teachers of students with high-needs. (4) There is a strong need for support from school and district offices to provide comprehensive support to Special Education teachers. (5) Administrators need to listen to what the teachers are saying and adapt support to meet their needs. (6) Accountability is needed to maintain the whole staff and meet staff and student needs. (7) Administrators also need support; they do not have all the answers. Recommendations for future research are included. Recommendations for future research included further exploring the type of training that would be most beneficial, including topics and accessibility for all staff. Further recommendations for research and practice were discussed in Section 3, based on the research findings and the participants' perceptions and experiences, which were explored throughout the study. The recommendations align with Billingsley's (2004) conceptual framework model for supporting Special Education teachers, aiming to reduce attrition and increase retention. Billingsley's (2004) model identifies four factors that foster Special Education teachers' involvement and dedication to education. Addressing teacher characteristics, qualifications, work environments, and

perceptions can increase Special Education teachers' commitment, reduce classroom attrition, increase teacher retention, and lead to higher-quality education and better support for students.

In conclusion, the purpose of the qualitative descriptive case study was to discern the support Special Education teachers require when working with high-needs students. While the primary focus of the study was to determine what support should look like for Special Education teachers, additional important information emerged regarding relationships and administrators' knowledge. Using Billingsley's (2004) conceptual framework to guide the best support for teachers by understanding the factors that contribute to teacher retention and attrition issues is a step toward addressing the concerns facing districts today. The takeaway from this study is that, despite the significant training and support provided to Special Education teachers, administrators' lack of knowledge about high-needs students continues to make the work even more challenging, hindering their ability to support teachers effectively.

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## Appendices

## Appendix A

### IRB Approval



9388 Lightwave Ave.  
San Diego, CA 92123  
irb@nu.edu

#### Notice of Exemption

September 23, 2025

To: Katie Wilbert

**Project Title:** Supporting Special Education teachers in High-Needs Classrooms: A Qualitative Descriptive Case Study

**NU IRB Number:** IRB-FY25-26-141

**Determination:** Exempt from further review 45 CFR 46.101 Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or

**Status: Active - Research activities may begin as of September 23, 2025**

Dear Katie Wilbert:

The study referenced above has been reviewed by the National University IRB. The IRB has determined

<https://outlook.office.com/mail/inbox/id/AAQkADVkYmFhODYyLWJiYzgtNGVIMC1hOGM4LTJIMDEzNGYzZDkwMwAQAP3GznWjgdKhRzKSROJ8m...> 1/2

9/23/25, 11:04 PM

Mail - Katie Wilbert - Outlook

your research is exempt from further review under 45 CFR 46.104, which means you will not need to renew your study and may begin your study effective immediately. However, if you find the need to change your study in any way, you will need to submit a modification to the IRB prior to implementing the changes. This will allow the IRB to determine whether or not the study still meets exemption criteria.

Please review your Post Approval Responsibilities here: [Approved Documents Guidelines](#)

For any questions regarding your protocol, please reach out to the IRB at irb@nu.edu.

## Appendix B

### Informed Consents



National University IRB  
9338 Lightwave Ave., San  
Diego, CA 92123  
irb@nu.edu

My name is Katie Wilbert, and I am a student at National University (NU). I also hold a role as the Director of Extended Learning in the district. Previously, I served as an administrator in the district's Special Education department.

I'm asking you to take part in a research study about how School Administrators can support Special Education teachers working with high-needs students, such as those with autism. The name of this research is "Supporting Special Education teachers in High-Needs Classrooms: A Qualitative Descriptive Case Study."

You may participate in this research if you meet all of the following criteria:

1. Must be 18 or older.
2. Must be a current Special Education teacher in Buffalo Public Schools.
3. Must work in or have worked in a special class (student: teacher: aide ratio 6:1:1, 8:1:1, etc.) to meet students' educational needs.
4. Must have experience working with students with ASD or other high-need students.

I hope to include 14-20 people in this research: 7-10 Special Education teachers and 7-10 building-level administrators.

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

**What you will be asked to do:** If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following activities:

Individual Interview:

1. Participants will participate in an individual interview that will take between 45-60 minutes via Microsoft Teams.
2. They will be recorded via Teams; the transcript will be downloaded after the interview.

Focus group:

1. Participants will be asked to participate in a focus group interview at a later agreed-upon time. The focus group will take between 60 and 90 minutes through Microsoft Teams.
2. The focus group will be recorded, with the transcript being downloaded at the conclusion of the focus group

During these activities, you will be asked questions about:

- Demographic information such as your years in education and teaching experiences
- Experience regarding high-needs classes and students
- Strategies for support for students
- Curriculum
- Support from Administrators
- Professional development

**Risks:** There are minimal foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this research. You can still skip any question you do not wish to answer, skip any activity, or stop participation at any time.

**Benefits:** If you participate, there are no direct benefits to you. This research may expand the body of knowledge in the subject area.

**Recording:** I would like to audio-record your responses with Microsoft Teams during the interview and focus group. You can disable the video function of the online meeting platform at any time.

**Mandated Reporting:** My professional role outside of NU requires me to report suspicion of child or elderly abuse, suspicion of possible harm to self or others, and committed crimes to the appropriate authorities.

**Confidentiality:** I will keep the records of this study private and take reasonable measures to protect the security of all your personal information. In any report I make public, I will not include any information that could identify you. I will securely store your data on a password-locked laptop for 3 years. Then, I will delete electronic data and destroy paper data with a paper shredder.

**Taking part is voluntary:** Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may quit at any time.

**If you have any questions, please ask them now.** If you have questions later, you may contact me at [katewilbert@gmail.com](mailto:katewilbert@gmail.com). or at 585-732-8446

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) via email at [irb@nu.edu](mailto:irb@nu.edu)



National University IRB  
9338 Lightwave Ave., San  
Diego, CA 92123  
irb@nu.edu

My name is Katie Wilbert, and I am a student at National University (NU). I also serve as the district's Director of Extended Learning. Previously, I was an administrator in the Special Education department in the district.

I'm asking you to take part in a research study about how School Administrators can support Special Education teachers working with high-needs students, such as those with autism. The name of this research is "Supporting Special Education teachers in High-Needs Classrooms: A Qualitative Descriptive Case Study."

You may participate in this research if you meet all of the following criteria:

1. Must be 18 years or older
2. A current building-level administrator
3. Must be currently working in Buffalo Public Schools
4. Must have experience working with high-needs special education students

I hope to include 14-20 people in this research, 7-10 Special Education teachers and 7-10 building-level administrators in this study.

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

**What you will be asked to do:** If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following activities:

3. Questionnaire: Participants will be asked to complete a questionnaire through Qualtrics that will take between 15-20 minutes. [Administrator questionnaire](#).

During these activities, you will be asked questions about:

- Demographics information such as your educational background, current position, work experience in education, and years
- Experience working with special education students and teachers and high-needs students with disabilities
- Supporting Special Education teachers.

**Risks:** There are minimal foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this research. You can still skip any question you do not wish to answer, skip any activity, or stop participation at any time.

**Benefits:** If you participate, there are no direct benefits to you. This research may increase the body of knowledge in the subject area of this research.

**Mandated Reporting:** My professional role outside of NU requires me to report suspicion of child or elderly abuse, suspicion of possible harm to self or others, and committed crimes to the appropriate authorities.

**Confidentiality:** I will keep the records of this study private and take reasonable measures to protect the security of all your personal information. In any report I make public, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. I will securely store your data on a password-locked laptop for 3 years. Then, I will delete electronic data and destroy paper data with a paper shredder.

**Taking part is voluntary:** Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may quit at any time.

**If you have questions:** Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at [katewilbert@gmail.com](mailto:katewilbert@gmail.com). or at 585-732-8446

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) via email at [irb@nu.edu](mailto:irb@nu.edu).

*By clicking the next button and completing the questionnaire, you indicate that you have consented to participate in this research. If you do not want to participate, please close the browser.*

**Appendix C**  
**Site Approval**



*Tonja Williams Knight, Ed.D.*  
*Superintendent*

*Ebony E. Prophet-Bullock, Ed.D.*  
*Chief Accountability Officer/  
Chief Information Officer*

June 24, 2025

Mrs. Katie Wilbert  
13333 Stage Road  
Akron, NY 14001

Re: Request for Research Activity

Dear Mrs. Wilbert:

Congratulations! Your Research Request entitled “Supporting Special Education Teachers in High Needs Classrooms” has been approved for the period of July 1, 2025 – December 31, 2025. Remember that school and teacher participation is optional. Also, as part of your recruitment, please state that this research has been approved by the Office of Shared Accountability.

Ensure that your study and data use are aligned with the signed Data Sharing Agreement with the Buffalo Public Schools.

All approved documents relating to your study may be requested from this office by administration if needed.

Sincerely,

*Dr. Ebony E. Prophet-Bullock*

Dr. Ebony E. Prophet-Bullock

## Appendix D

### Individual Interview Protocol and Questions

**Introduction:** Hello, and thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview today. I am Katie Wilbert, a doctoral student at Northcentral University conducting my dissertation research. You may have known me since I was in the Special Education Department. Much of my work revolved around staffing and supporting Special Education teachers.

This interview is expected to last about 45- 60 minutes. I will record our discussion and take notes to ensure I have complete information. Your responses will remain confidential and follow research protocols.

**Lead into the Interview:** I am interested in learning more about how administrators can help support Special Education teachers, especially in high-needs classrooms. High-needs students and classrooms include students with autism and other disabilities that require high levels of support to be successful. This information will be confidential, and your answers will not be shared with anyone. Your perspectives and experiences are essential to understanding how administrators can help support Special Education teachers.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

You have expertise in teaching special education students within the district, and I would like to gather data from this interview that will help Special Education teachers move forward.

#### Individual Interview Questions: Special Education teachers

Participant:
Pseudonym:
Years teaching in Special Education:
Years in Buffalo:

Special Education Experience (years, assignments):

<b>RQ1</b> What are Special Education teachers' perspectives on instructional supports needed for high-needs students to succeed?	
<b>Questions</b>	<b>Prompting Questions</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How have the demographics of students with disabilities changed over the years?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Placement opportunities</li> <li>What has changed with the Identification process?</li> <li>Where have you seen an increase in specific disabilities?</li> <li>How are families and teachers responding to the changes</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What does a typical day look like for you in your special education classroom?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How does the daily attendance of students affect your day</li> <li>Meetings- how many meetings do you have to attend? How does your class get covered?</li> <li>Instruction- How much time do you spend planning in school/out of school? How much time does it take to plan for accommodations and SDI</li> <li>Paraprofessionals- Is your classroom staffed to ratio? Is the person(s) act as a support to the room? Is the person(s) a hindrance to the room?</li> <li>Data collection- What do you have to collect? How much time does it take? Does it help?</li> <li>Parents- Communication, are they helpful? What is working?</li> <li>Paperwork- How much do you have? What types? How long does it take to complete?</li> <li>Challenges- What challenges are there with teaching SWD?</li> <li>Rewards- Describe why you teach SWD?</li> </ul> <p>Why did you first go into special education</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What behaviors do you see in your or others' classrooms related to disability?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How is it handled? Admin, student support teams? Security?</li> <li>Administrator's presence- Are you supported? How would you like to be supported? Positive</li> </ul>

	<p>and negative experiences? Do they understand the sometimes-unique strategies that are needed?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family support- Do families support your efforts?</li> <li>• Colleagues' support- do they understand when there are good days and rough days</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What instructional tools/resources have been helpful (or not) in teaching high-need students?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sensory items- what are available? Is there success? Admin support usage?</li> <li>• Behavior strategies- Help with implementation? Help with devising strategies? Admin support?</li> <li>• Additional staff- Are there any other staff members in the building to support your classroom and efforts?</li> <li>• Curriculum- How are you supported, especially if you are teaching/planning all subjects</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What training/professional development would you like to see offered?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Topics- workshop or informational?</li> <li>• Time frame/offerings</li> <li>• Format- virtual/in-person/asynchronous</li> <li>• Follow-up/check-in</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is your comfort level with curriculum and instructional initiatives?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Level of training</li> <li>• Implementation</li> <li>• General education teacher support</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What other instructional support would be helpful?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Behaviors</li> <li>• Curriculum</li> <li>• Training</li> </ul>
<p><b>RQ2</b> What are Special Education teachers' perspectives on how administrators can provide resources to support teachers in high-needs classrooms?</p>	
<b>Questions</b>	<b>Prompting Questions</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the level of support you receive from building administrators?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instructional support</li> <li>• SDI to support individual needs</li> <li>• Behavioral support</li> <li>• Special Education responsibilities and paperwork</li> <li>• Understanding of thinking outside of the box to support students</li> <li>• Flexibility in adapting to the needs of students and not on a strict curriculum plan</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What type of support would you like to receive from building administrators?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visits- frequency/duration</li> <li>• Support with behavior</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support with instruction</li> <li>• Included in grade-level and/or content meetings/training</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the level of support you receive from central office administrators?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support from Special education administrators (behavior, lesson plans, strategies, work in the classroom)</li> <li>• Special Education coaches</li> <li>• Support from the instructional department?</li> <li>• Support from student support</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What support would you like to receive from central office administrators?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training/workshops/mentoring</li> <li>• Classroom/teacher visits</li> <li>• Format</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What would be your ideal classroom/school setup for students with high-needs disabilities?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design</li> <li>• Instruction</li> <li>• Staff-support</li> <li>• Schedule</li> <li>• Seating</li> <li>• Manipulatives/activities</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What would you like administrators to know about being in the classroom?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What would make things easier?</li> </ul>

### **Conclusion:**

Thank you for meeting with me today and sharing your perspectives/experiences on how administrators can help support Special Education teachers in the classroom.

### **Debriefing questions:**

1. Do you have any questions or concerns?
2. Is there anything you would like to add or clarify about what was discussed today?
3. Once I have transcribed our interview, I will send a copy for you to review to ensure I captured everything correctly.

### **Supporting Resources**

If emotional support is needed, support is available from the Employee Assistance Program.

## Appendix E

### Focus Group Protocol and Questions

**Introduction:** Hello, and thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group today. I am Katie Wilbert, a doctoral student at Northcentral University conducting my dissertation research. You may have known me since I was in the Special Education Department. Much of my work revolved around staffing and supporting Special Education teachers.

This focus group is expected to last about 60-90 minutes. I will record your discussion and take notes to ensure I have complete information. Your responses will be held in confidence.

**Lead into the focus group:** Thank you. I am interested in learning more from each of you about how administrators can help support Special Education teachers, especially in high-needs classrooms. This information will remain confidential, and your answers will not be shared with anyone. Your perspectives and experiences are essential to understanding how administrators can help support Special Education teachers. I will ask questions and then open it up to the group to answer; the first person to raise their virtual hand will start, and then we will go to the next person to raise their virtual hand. When you begin, each time you answer, state your name clearly for transcription purposes. Follow-up prompts and reminders about including your name each time you speak will be provided as needed.

Please remember: There are no right or wrong answers; there are only different experiences to share. I will be recording one person speaking at a time. You do not need to agree with others, but must listen respectfully as others share their views. You all have expertise in teaching special education students within the district. I hope to gather data from this interview to help Special Education teachers move forward with more support. Do you have any questions before we get started?

### Focus group questions: Special Education teachers

<b><i>RQ1</i></b> What are Special Education teachers' perspectives on instructional supports needed for high-needs students to succeed?	
<b>Questions</b>	<b>Group Prompting Questions</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How have the demographics of students with disabilities changed?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Please discuss (continue until all have had a chance to answer)</li> <li>b. Provide details and experiences</li> </ol> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe your classroom</li> <li>• Describe placement issues</li> <li>• Access to services</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does a typical day look like for you in your special education classroom?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Please discuss (continue until all have had a chance to answer)</li> <li>b. Provide details and experiences</li> </ol> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent involvement?</li> <li>• Student Support involvement?</li> <li>• How do you manage attending (and preparing) for meetings?</li> <li>• General Education team involvement?</li> <li>• Encore teacher involvement/interactions</li> <li>• Instruction- Planning, access to resources</li> <li>• Paraprofessionals- Are you staffed according to ratios?</li> <li>• IEP implementation- Progress notes, BIP data</li> <li>• Work with outside agencies</li> <li>• Challenges- What challenges are there with teaching SWD?</li> <li>• Rewards- Describe why you teach SWD? Why did you first go into special education</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What behaviors do you see in your or others' classrooms related to disability?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Please discuss (continue until all have had a chance to answer)</li> <li>b. Provide details and experiences</li> </ol> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gen-ed vs. SPED</li> <li>• Suspensions?</li> <li>• How is it handled? Admin, student support teams? Security?</li> <li>• Family support- Do families support your efforts?</li> <li>• Colleagues' involvement and understanding</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What instructional tools/resources have been helpful (or not) in teaching high-need students?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Please discuss (continue until all have had a chance to answer)</li> <li>b. Provide details and experiences</li> </ol> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What would be helpful?</li> <li>• Has anything that has been provided helped?</li> <li>• Behaviors</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Additional staff- Are there any other staff members in the building to support your classroom and efforts?</li> <li>• Curriculum- How are you supported, especially if you are teaching/planning all subjects, and students' ability to access?</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What training/professional development would you like to see offered? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Please discuss (continue until all have had a chance to answer)</li> <li>b. Provide details and experiences</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Topics- workshop or informational?</li> <li>• Time frame/offerings</li> <li>• Format- virtual/in-person/asynchronous</li> <li>• Follow-up/check-in</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implementation of curriculum and initiatives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Please discuss (continue until all have had a chance to answer)</li> <li>b. Provide details and experiences</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rigor- expectations from you and your students</li> <li>• Testing? Data and students' results</li> <li>• Can you access training from the departments- elementary ed, social studies, ELA, etc?</li> <li>• What happens with the new rollout of the curriculum/initiative?</li> <li>• Treatment and support from the general ed teachers</li> </ul>
<b>RQ2</b>	
What are Special Education teachers' perspectives on how administrators can provide resources to support teachers in high-needs classrooms?	
<b>Questions</b>	<b>Prompting Questions</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the level of support you receive from building administrators? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Please discuss (continue until all have had a chance to answer)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instructional support</li> <li>• Behavioral support</li> <li>• Special Education responsibilities and paperwork</li> <li>• Understanding of thinking outside of the box to support students</li> <li>• Flexibility in adapting to the needs of students and not on a strict curriculum plan</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What type of support would you like to receive from building administrators? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Please discuss (continue until all have had a chance to answer)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visits- frequency/duration</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the level of support you receive from central office administrators?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support from Special education administrators (behavior, lesson plans, strategies, work in the classroom)</li> </ul>

<p>a. Please discuss (continue until all have had a chance to answer)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Special Education coaches</li> <li>• Support from the instructional department?</li> <li>• Support from student support</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What support would you like to receive from central office administrators?</li> </ul> <p>a. Please discuss (continue until all have had a chance to answer)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training/workshops/mentoring</li> <li>• Classroom/teacher visits</li> <li>• Format</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What would be your ideal classroom/school setup for students with high-needs disabilities?</li> </ul> <p>a. Please discuss (continue until all have had a chance to answer)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design</li> <li>• Instruction</li> <li>• Staff-support</li> <li>• Schedule</li> <li>• Seating</li> <li>• Manipulatives/activities</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are some ways to help more people enter the Special Education field?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruitment</li> <li>• Incentives</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are ways to help new Special Education teachers remain in teaching?</li> </ul>	

**Conclusion:** Thank you for meeting with me today and sharing your perspectives/experiences on how administrators can help support Special Education teachers in the classroom.

**Debriefing questions:**

1. Do you have any questions or concerns?
2. Is there anything you would like to add or clarify about what was discussed today?
3. Once I have transcribed our interview, I will send a copy for you to review to ensure I captured everything correctly.

**Supporting Resources:**

If emotional support is needed, support is available from the Employee Assistance Program.

## Appendix F

### Administrator Questionnaire

Directions: Please read the informed consent form included in the questionnaire.

Have you read the consent form and understand the requirements for participating in the survey?                      Yes \_\_\_\_\_      No \_\_\_\_\_

#### Administrator Questionnaire-Qualtrics form

<b><i>RQ3</i></b> What are administrators' perspectives on what resources they need to effectively-support teachers in high-needs classrooms?	
Have you read the consent form and understand the requirements for participating in the survey?	Yes _____
	No _____
Name:	
Email:	
2.      Are you a current Principal or Assistant Principal?	Principal  Assistant Principal  Central Office <small>(not included in this study)</small>
3.      Are you currently assigned to an elementary or high school?	Elementary  High School
4.      What did you teach prior to becoming an administrator?	
5.      How many years did you teach before becoming an administrator?	
6.      Did you take any coursework in college relating to working with students with disabilities or supporting teachers of students with disabilities?	
7.      Did you take coursework regarding special education during your administrative program?	
8.      What was your exposure to working with Special Education before becoming an administrator?	
9.      What levels of special education services are provided to students in your building?	

10. Have you seen an increase in students with high-needs disabilities?	
11. If yes, explain the increases you have seen.	
12. What supports are available to Special Education teachers within the building?	
13. What supports are available to Special Education teachers from the district?	
14. What do you wish you knew about special education and supporting teachers?	
15. How did you learn, or how are you continuing to learn, about special education?	
16. What do you feel you need to better support Special Education teachers?	
17. High-needs students and classrooms include students with autism and other disabilities that require high levels of support to be successful. Have you seen and/or experienced a growth in the number of high-needs students? How has this changed your approach with students? With teachers?	
18. What do you feel Special Education teachers need to remain in the classroom and work with high-needs students?	
19. What is the best advice you share with new Special Education teachers?	
20. Is there any additional information you would like to share?	