INDISPENSABLE EXPERIENCES: PREPARING PRESERVICE TEACHERS FOR THE RIGORS OF TEACHING SPECIAL EDUCATION IN THE RURAL SETTING

by

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Dedication

To my husband of twenty years, Robert, and sons Cody, Chuck, Corben, and Corey, who weathered many hours of my adventure to help change the face of special education in our hometown and hopefully, eventually the world at large. I appreciate the support (and reminders to keep writing) throughout the past six years of my doctoral program and dissertation writing. Thank you to each of my sons for understanding my absence (or presence while I stared at my computer instead of watching) at hockey and soccer games, golf matches, and swimming competitions.

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative descriptive study explored the research question "What do veteran and pre-service special education teachers believe are indispensable experiences when a student is learning to become a special education teacher?" Data were collected from veteran and pre-service special education teachers who work and study in a two-county rural area. Data were acquired through 58 open-ended surveys, six interviews, and the researcher's own perceptions and experiences. The results reveal that according to the sample, pre-service special education teachers in a rural area should experience varying and multiple ongoing experiences in the clinical setting, be provided with an in-depth understanding of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process, understand how to administer assessments and how to use the data, and understand the importance of building relationships. Veteran teachers also identified experiences in working with parents and an understanding of how to work with paraprofessionals as indispensable experiences. This study has implications for pre-service special education programs.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The chronically high rate of special education teacher attrition in the U.S. school system has created a challenge for educational leaders (Tyler & Brunner, 2014). Given that special educators are responsible for providing an individualized educational experience for students with special needs, it is critically important to provide and retain highly trained, experienced, motivated, and compassionate teachers in the field. However, more than half of new special education teachers leave the field within the first four years of their careers, creating serious consequences for students with special needs and the schools that serve them (Bettini, Cheyney, Wang, & Leko, 2015; Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2008). The problem is further complicated by the shortage of highly qualified special educators—a rate that has hovered at 10% over the past several decades (Sindelar, Brownell, & Billingsley, 2010). Attrition, coupled with the already alarming special educator shortages reported in most school districts, has resulted in nearly one million U.S. schoolchildren with special needs receiving services from untrained or inadequately trained personnel or receiving no services at all (Tyler & Brunner, 2014).

The shortage of qualified special educators is most pronounced in rural schools that serve populations characterized by poverty, low achievement, disability, and cultural diversity (Childre, 2014). The characteristics of the special needs population create further challenges for rural special educators. In some small rural school districts, special education teachers provide instruction to students in multiple grades across a range of subjects (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). Special educators are often asked to address a wide variety of student needs and disability

categories in rural schools, compelling teachers to work outside their typical training and expertise (Brownell, Ross, Colón, & McCallum, 2005). The end result is often that untrained teachers serve students with the greatest educational needs.

To assist with the problem of underprepared special educators, further research is needed to (a) determine how teacher preparation programs can provide coursework experiences to better prepare teacher candidates for rural special education classrooms and (b) explore perceptions regarding strategies to enhance the framework of rural clinical practice in special education teacher preparation programs. Highly trained special educators who are prepared for the rigors of the field and the complexities of working in rural classrooms are needed in today's U.S. public education system. Discovering what perceptions exist can provide guidance for preparation programs and elucidate the appropriate skills, knowledge, disposition, and competencies necessary to be successful in the rural special education classroom.

Background of the Problem

In 1972, eight million U.S. children had some type of disability, with only half of them receiving educational services (Douvanis & Hulsey, 2002). Before 1975, the federal government did not regulate special education, and children with disabilities were not educated with general education students in the school setting. Students with disabilities were often placed in institutions, and many were provided minimal educational services (Stein, 2009). After legal action in 1975, a new law, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), which is known today as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), transformed the field of education. However, the parameters of the law, along with the shortage of well-trained

special education teachers, posed an ongoing problem. Years before IDEA passed, researchers conducted a study that revealed shortages of well-prepared special education teachers. One such study explained that "perhaps not more than one-fourth of the teachers needed are available, and some of these may not be well prepared for their work" (Mackie, Dunn, & Cain, 1960, p. v). The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 states that students with special needs are entitled to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE)—a right and a moral obligation, yet the education field may be falling short given the paucity of qualified professionals.

Federal law and the need for quality services necessitate special education teacher preparation programs produce more highly trained special education teachers. Teacher education is incredibly complex, and this complexity is especially acute in special education, where beginning teachers play many roles and serve students with diverse needs (Brownell, Ross, Colón, & McCallum, 2005). Understanding how to train teachers who can withstand the rigors of the field is critical for improving the U.S. public education system as a whole. Furthermore, even more problematic for the field of special education is the critical shortage of special education teachers in many regions, which is particularly pronounced in rural areas (Johnson, 2015). The need for skilled, knowledgeable, and highly trained special education teachers in rural areas who can deliver intensive, individualized instruction to support a child's academic growth cannot be overstated (Johnson, 2015).

Statement of the Problem

Although the educational need for well-trained special educators capable of withstanding the rigors of the field was identified more than 50 years ago (Mackie, Dunn, & Cain, 1960), the shortage of well-prepared special education teachers in the U.S. public education system persists today. Teacher shortages in special education are consistently noted and are particularly significant in rural and remote areas (Vernon-Dotson, Floyd, Dukes, & Darling, 2014). In addition, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics expects the demand for special education teachers across the United States to increase by 17% through 2018 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 2009). Furthermore, the problem is compounded by the high rate of attrition of special educators, estimated at 50% within educators' first five years of teaching (Tyler & Brunner, 2014). Educators, governmental bodies, and learning institutions need to explore measures to rectify the dearth of special education teachers. However, not only do they need to increase the supply of special educators in regions where they are scarce, teachers also must be prepared to lead classrooms for students with special needs, be provided with real-world insight of the field, and be given the opportunity to develop an accurate perception of what it really takes to become an expert special education teacher. In order to better prepare special education teachers, it would be useful to better understand what preservice and inservice teachers believe to be necessary to their preparation for the field.

Purpose of the Study

While the literature discusses the need to improve special education teacher preparation programs (i.e. Conderman, & Katsiyannis, 2002; Dukes, Darling, & Doan, 2014; Morewood &

Condo, 2012), further research is needed, especially for programs that focus on teaching special education in a rural setting. In addition to exploring what constitutes appropriate adult learner-oriented coursework and experience for those preparing to become special education teachers, this study focused on the perceptions of rural veteran special educators and special education preservice teachers on what may be needed to become an expert special education teacher, including what is needed to be successful in a rural setting. The following question guides this research: "What do veteran and preservice special education teachers believe are indispensable experiences when a student is learning to become a special education teacher?"

To explore the perceptions of both veteran and preservice special education teachers, I conducted a qualitative descriptive study through an open-ended survey and follow-up interviews of veteran and preservice special educators who either work or are educated in a rural area. The study aimed to reveal perspectives that could inform recommendations for how special education teacher preparation programs might better prepare preservice teachers for teaching in the rural setting.

To better understand the existing research regarding areas of focus which comprise special education teacher preparation, in Chapter 2, I review the literature on special education law, the obligations of teacher preparation programs, pragmatism and learning through experience, and components of teacher preparation in special education. In Chapter 3, I outline the methodology of the study, and in Chapter 4, I review the results of the study. Last, in Chapter 5, I discuss the findings and study implications. Through this study, I hope to provide educational leaders with recommendations for how special education teacher preparation

programs could enhance both coursework and clinical experiences to emphasize the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to handle the rigors of teaching special education in a rural setting.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Special education teacher preparation is a relatively young field, and there is still much to explore (Dukes, Darling, & Doan, 2014). Although laws were passed in the United States as early as 1827 that required states to begin to provide a free public education, laws to protect students with special needs in the public school system were not mandated until 1975 (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). As a result, the past 41 years of special education, as compared with 189 years of general education, have provided some measure of guidance to determine how to best provide services to students with special needs. In special education, however, a shortage of teachers has compounded the problem. The demand for highly skilled teachers who are capable of providing individualized instruction for students has caused complications for both special educators and the diverse students they teach. In addition to persistent personnel shortages, the field faces other chronic problems. For example, beginning special educators are more susceptible than general education teachers to an early departure, and the shortage of special education teachers in rural areas often results in the recruitment of underqualified educators (Brownell, Hirsch, & Seo, 2004; Johnson, 2015).

The Role of the Special Education Teacher

To fully comprehend the role of the special education teacher, it is necessary to understand the historical background surrounding the field of special education. In the years before the federal government regulated special education, children with disabilities were not educated with their general education peers in the school setting. Often they lived in institutions

that did not provide adequate education (Stein, 2009). In 1972, eight million U.S. children had disabilities, half of whom were receiving no educational services (Douvanis & Hulsey, 2002). In addition, parents were able to opt to exclude their children with special needs (e.g., learning disabilities, cognitive impairment, visual impairment, emotional behavioral disorders) from compulsory school attendance regulations, causing a self-selected exclusion from educational services.

At the same time, Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) was also systematically denied in the school setting and therefore many children with disabilities were being excluded from meaningful and essential educational services (Douvanis & Hulsey, 2002). After legal action, in 1975, IDEA, transformed the field of education. It mandated that public schools provide Free and Appropriate Public Education to all children with disabilities in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), when previously students with disabilities were either excluded from schools or placed in general education classrooms until they were old enough to drop out or aged out of the system (Chun, 2009). Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) is the requirement in federal law that students with disabilities receive their education, to the maximum extent appropriate, with peers without disabilities and that special education students are not removed from general education classes unless, even with the appropriate supplemental aids and services, education in the general education setting cannot be achieved satisfactorily. The goal of the new legislation was to provide educational services, individualized to help students with special needs meet their maximum potential, within the school setting. However, the road to the Individuals

with Disabilities Education Act was long. To better understand the evolution of special education laws, a brief overview of several pivotal special education rulings follows.

Formative special education law cases. The evolution of laws to protect students with special needs has been an ongoing process, primarily through common law and state statutes (Beatty, 2013). First, important educational victories, such as the landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), have helped define states' responsibility to provide equal education for all students. Second, initial legislative action in special education was enacted as a result of *The Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Citizens v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1972), in which the ruling established the right to an education for Pennsylvania children with disabilities and expressed a clear preference for including students in the educational setting with general education students (*mainstreaming*), with homebound instruction or residential placements used in only the most extraordinary circumstances (Douvanis & Hulsey, 2002). Third, efforts to ensure that students with disabilities received the same opportunities as their nondisabled peers were reflected in the passage of the federal Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) in 1975 (Beatty, 2013). The U.S. Congress adopted mainstreaming to the maximum extent appropriate for students with disabilities when it enacted this law. Fourth, over time, amendments that improved the EAHCA were enacted and are now reflected in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which guarantees that every child with a disability is given basic Free and Appropriate Public Education (Stein, 2009).

Although students with disabilities are guaranteed FAPE under IDEA**,** the standard that comprises the definition of *appropriate* is often low, which has precipitated legal challenges that

have been taken to the Supreme Court. For example, in *Board of Education of Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Rowley* (1982), the Supreme Court held that a school district was in compliance with IDEA if it merely extended a basic floor of opportunity to students with disabilities (Stein, 2009). In the context of the basic floor, the educational agency need not provide the best possible education to students with disabilities nor provide an education equal to that of the students in the general education setting (Stein, 2009). The decision of whether an education is appropriate under IDEA is determined on a case-by-case basis and decided according to the individual needs of the child with a disability, considering recommendations from school officials (Stein, 2009). What makes up FAPE for a child with special needs is a decision made by the Individual Education Program team, and the district is responsible for the cost of the services. Furthermore, if the public school determines that it cannot provide an appropriate education or if the parent decides to request a hearing with an appeals judge and determines that the public program is inadequate, parents are entitled to reimbursement for a suitable private program (Dunn & Derthick, 2008).

For each district, it is of utmost importance that they plan services that are adequate. Given that money is spent to render services for a child with special needs, it is recommended that the priority of the district and, in particular, the teacher, focuses on (a) developing a relationship of trust with the child's parents and (b) producing notable progress for the child. These priorities ultimately focus on the substantive side of parental rights and student progress that may help to align educational programming designed to minimize disputes and resolve them without litigation (Mueller, 2015). Ultimately, the special education teacher needs to help design

an educational program that meets the needs of the student with special needs and to ensure that the plan is implemented with fidelity and care. Therefore, the role of the special education teacher in the entire special education system as mandated by IDEA is integral.

Special education teachers and IDEA. The role of the teacher has become increasingly complex as a result of court cases that have defined IDEA and various legal mandates prescribing services for students with special needs. To meet the varying needs of students with a wide range of disabilities, special education services are offered on a continuum of settings, ranging from the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) in a general education classroom to the most restrictive placements in separate special education schools, such as a residential setting or an institution (Carson, 2015). Sometimes the special education teacher will work in an inclusionary setting, which requires co-teaching with a general education teacher within a general education setting. In these settings, special education teachers will deliver services to students with disabilities alongside general education students. To further complicate the job of special education teachers, they are responsible for directly teaching curricular content, writing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), serving as consultants, teaching social and vocational skills, completing assessments, and providing supplementary aides and services, all of which include instructional tasks and noninstructional responsibilities (Johnson, 2015). In addition, special education teachers must instruct students to higher academic standards, which often requires using new and evolving curricula, and do so in the face of other initiatives such as Response to Intervention and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. At the same time, they are required to abide by policy-driven accountability systems that tie student learning to

teacher evaluation (Maheady, Magiera, & Simmons, 2016). A confusing educational landscape characterized by ever-changing federal requirements, multiple service delivery models, and the inclusion movement has complicated special education teachers' roles (Conderman & Katsiyannis, 2002).

The first few years of teaching present numerous challenges for special educators. For example, new special education teachers spend much of their time acclimating to diverse and fluctuating caseloads and adjusting to the implementation of new mandates and changing expectations of principals, families, and general educators. In addition, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which requires students with special needs to be educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), has caused special education teachers to deliver services in co-taught settings while accommodating and modifying the grade-level content (Wasburn-Moses, 2009). The mandate of the LRE also requires special education teachers to be prepared to teach in self-contained or inclusive settings with students with varying needs and disability categories (e.g., learning disabilities, cognitive impairment, visual impairment, emotional impairment) concurrently. Depending on the severity of the disabilities found in a given year within a given classroom, the setting in which the teacher works with students could continually change. In the elementary setting, as students are identified, the teacher must understand how to work with the child as well as work toward building a positive, collaborative relationship with the child's family. If the child was identified with special needs before three years of age, the teacher must understand Individualized Family Service Plan services that were used in the home or child care center and determine how new goals and objectives of the IEP can

help to orchestrate a continuum of services for the child with special needs. It is integral for the families of children with special needs to be a part of the Individualized Family Service Plan and IEP planning processes; educators can ensure that this happens (Ray, Pewitt-Kinder, & George, 2009).

Special education teachers must also address the unique problems and needs of secondary students that come with teaching in a secondary environment. For example, preservice and in-service special education teachers need to learn how to manage the needs of adolescents with special needs and how to plan transition services (Conderman & Katsiyannis, 2002). The evolution of federal special education legislation since the 1975 passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) has involved steadily strengthening the mandate that parents of children receiving special education services be full partners with school staff in educational planning for their children. In the secondary setting, this means that the families, along with adolescents with special needs, participate in planning for students after they graduate high school so that their preferences and life goals help guide the planning process (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Javitz, & Valdes, 2012).

The range of services in special education not only expand across the disability categories; one special education teacher certification may encompass all grade levels ranging from Kindergarten through Grade 12 (Wasburn-Moses, 2009). Even though a special education teacher may possess a certification in one area (e.g., learning disabilities), it is not uncommon for the teacher to also serve students with a range of disabilities and academic aptitude. It is clear that special education teachers at all levels must be knowledgeable in multiple areas. Therefore,

the preparation they receive in their preservice education and training is pivotal to their eventual success (Conderman, Johnston-Rodriguez, Hartman, & Walker, 2013).

The Role of Higher Education

To prepare special education teachers for the field, special education preparation programs must ensure that a disconnect between preparation and practice does not force new teachers into a problematic transition as they enter a teaching position in a classroom of their own (Conderman et al., 2013). Unfortunately, there is little indication that recent graduates of special education programs are well prepared to assume the responsibilities and demands of the job (Wasburn-Moses, 2009). Although Wasburn-Moses (2009) found some of the most common roles of special education teachers include facilitating inclusion, managing behavior, and doing paperwork, the author noted that these skills are often hard to teach without an effective clinical setting in which preservice special education teachers can see models of actual practice. Although many complications of training special education teachers have been defined (Conderman & Katsiyannis, 2002; Johnson, 2015; Morewood & Condo, 2012), it is important to note that throughout the literature, evidence exists regarding areas where special education teacher preparation programs can be influential in training special educators. The subsequent section highlights some of these areas.

Creating partnerships between higher education and K–12 schools. Wasburn-Moses (2009) stated that creating partnerships between institutions of higher education and K–12 schools is critical to alleviate the pressure caused by both the shortage of teachers and the rate of attrition in the field. Researchers have stated that "[e]xemplary teacher education programs

demonstrate shared knowledge and common beliefs about teaching and learning among university and school-based faculty" (Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005, p. 390). However, breakdowns in teacher education transpire when the vision of teaching and learning presented in teacher preparation programs clashes with those found in K–12 schools (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005). To overcome the historical separation of these entities, institutions of higher education, school administration, and policymakers must form strong partnerships at all levels, including preservice teacher preparation, novice teacher induction, and continued professional development. Partnerships are likely to result in the facilitation of a unified vision of possibilities for teaching and learning in special education (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005).

According to Howell, Carpenter, and Jones (2013), at the University of Louisville, a model of school partnerships with higher education was created by the faculty and a local school. With the intent to improve coursework and clinical experiences, a faculty member from the education department was assigned to a cooperating school and was given space at the school to conduct the university course. The aim was to provide preservice teachers with real-world experiences that reveal the realities of the job. As a result, for one course, preservice teachers began at the school site with a 30- to 40-minute lecture in the faculty classroom that involved a set of focus questions for the day. The preservice teachers were then dismissed to a classroom where they spent time observing the classroom teacher or working with a small group of students. During this time, teachers reflected on the focus questions for the day and then returned to their college faculties' on-site classroom to debrief their experience and prepare for the next

(Howell et al., 2013). One student who participated in the partnership experiences reported, “It is so cool to see what I am reading in real life” after reflecting on what she had learned through her course (Howell et al., 2013, p. 44).

According to Carlson, Kimpton, Oswald, and Puglisi (2007), the University of Minnesota-Duluth also served as a model for improving preservice teacher preparation through its creation of a university and school partnership in a traditional model of teacher preparation for physical education teachers. To ensure consistency regarding expectations of the coursework, the standards for the university-school partnership were adapted from Standards of the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium, state standards, and university course requirements under traditional course credit guidelines. To ensure that effective teaching strategies were modeled by the faculty and experienced first-hand by the preservice teachers, the university professor and cooperating teacher formed a partnership. As a result, preservice teachers, under the direct supervision of the university faculty and teacher, assumed more responsibilities and taught weekly in the school. As a result of the partnership, the preservice teachers overwhelmingly reported that they felt better prepared for the real world of teaching (Carlson et al., 2007). As coursework and clinical experiences are combined and partnerships are formed between universities and cooperating schools, the realities of the field may be better exposed to those training to be special education teachers. However, it is important that in the partnership, the essential skills and knowledge are learned to help ensure that new teachers will be ready for the job.

Knowledge and skill acquisition. In addition to partnerships, special education preservice teachers must be equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to survive the rigor of teaching. Preservice special education teachers need to learn a massive amount of information in a relatively short time to serve in various roles in the field (Vernon-Dotson, Floyd, Dukes, & Darling, 2014). More specifically, special education teachers must understand the content and pedagogical knowledge that all teachers must possess; in addition, they must also be able to create and modify curricula, implement evidence-based practices, understand the spectrum of disabilities and strategies for working with varying student needs, write IEPs, and know how to access and use assistive technology with the curriculum so that students can access the grade-level content, all while ensuring that they are complying with federal laws (Roberts, Benedict, & Thomas, 2014). As preservice teachers learn the knowledge and skills needed to successfully teach special education, they must also be trained in the administrative duties of managing the required paperwork (e.g., compliance with IEPs, progress reports, behavior plans, Medicaid), given that the average amount of time a special education teacher spends on administrative paperwork per week is five hours (Mehrenberg, 2013; Vannest, Hagan-Burke, Parker, & Soares, 2011).

Clinical experiences. According to the literature, special education teacher preparation programs need to provide sufficient clinical experience, which is a crucial component of preservice teacher preparation (Maheady, Smith, & Jabot, 2014). According to Maheady and colleagues (2014), it is essential that carefully crafted clinical experiences are extensively integrated into coursework, developmentally sequenced, and intensively supervised.

Furthermore, the classrooms where students work with cooperating teachers need to be selected on the basis of the skills of the teachers. Brownell, Ross, Colón, and McCallum (2005) suggested that cooperating teachers should also be dedicated to collaboration with university faculty members to help students practice what they learn in coursework. Furthermore, Oliver and Reschly (2010) determined that adequate preparation in effective classroom management is necessary for special education teachers because working with students with significant behavior problems may be a part of the teacher's responsibility. As coursework is aligned with supervised clinical experiences, multiple opportunities for preservice teachers to situate their learning in practical experiences may help promote the growth of the essential skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary to become a successful special education teacher (Leko, Brownell, Sindelar, & Kiely, 2015).

Leko and Brownell (2001) found that without such opportunities, special education preservice teachers were found to have difficulty applying their knowledge. Most teacher preparation programs provide practical teaching opportunities; however, clinical experiences vary widely in duration and quality on the basis of how the special education teacher preparation faculty have structured the clinical components (Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2002). Because there is no definitive model for crafting ideal practice-based learning experiences, the 2010 *Report of the Blue Ribbon Panel on Clinical Preparation and Partnerships for Improved Student Learning* (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2010) called for more focused research to identify the essential features of effective clinical preparation, which may help to improve the field as a whole. However, the literature suggests that the compilation

of coursework and clinical experience is the most appropriate method to train new special education teachers (Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2002; Leko and Brownell, 2001).

As the literature helps to define (1) the U.S. special education system through legislation, (2) the role of the special education teacher within the law, and (3) the role of higher education in order to train special education teachers, to improve educational experiences for those studying to become special education teachers, it is important to understand how people can learn through experience. To help expand understanding of how special education teacher preparation programs can address the learning needs of their preservice special education teachers, understanding how people learn and providing experiences that fit the need of the students may help to ensure the success of the special education preservice teacher in the field.

Pragmatism and andragogy. To grasp how to improve educational experiences in special education teacher preparation programs for preservice teachers, it is essential to understand how people learn. This section describes the influence of pragmatism and the basic principles of pedagogy and andragogy to examine the overall process of learning and how it relates to special education teacher preparation. The pragmatic method interprets each perception by tracing its respective practical outcomes (James, 2010). The American pragmatic philosopher John Dewey believed education could be scientifically studied and effective practice is essentially an art (Dewey, 1938). In addition, Dewey (1938) believed schools should integrate academic learning and social life into one framework to help children think and act intelligently. In other words, as opposed to simply training children through behavioral conditioning, educational systems need to incorporate learning activities to convey ideas and help students

develop understanding and skills they can use for life. Furthermore, Dewey (1938) stated that educators are responsible for providing students with experiences that are immediately valuable and that better enable students to contribute to society. To determine how Dewey's work impacts teacher preparation, Nelsen (2015) suggested that the principles of pragmatism allow a spirit of inquiry to be infused into teacher preparation programs, whereby students are invited and challenged to ask and answer relevant and pressing educational questions and derive answers alongside similarly motivated classmates. Although Nelson's study is centered around general education teacher preparation programs, in preparing teachers for the field, general or special education, it may benefit faculty responsible for planning preservice teacher programs to better understand how to provide experiences for students that can be applied to the real world context. This is critical to the success of the students they teach.

It may be ideal to build upon the pragmatic approach for adult learners preparing to be special educators. However, an extensive search of the literature suggests the principles of pragmatism have yet to be applied directly to special education teacher preparation within the literature. The obligation of higher education is to ensure special education preservice teachers have learned the appropriate knowledge, skills, dispositions, and experiences to ready them to creatively and intuitively use research-based interventions to improve student learning. Given the important relationship between content knowledge and the application of knowledge, special education teacher preparation programs, both coursework and clinical practice, should be grounded in appropriate learning theories (Clark, 2009; Kennedy, Driver, Pullen, Ely, & Cole, 2013).

Pragmatism shines light on how to foster an optimal learning environment for students with special needs, but it is equally important to understand adult learning to design programs that provide the knowledge and skills required for a career in special education. The history of training another human can be traced back to the Stone Age as parents passed essential skills down to their children (Hobson, 1993). Training adults, compared with training children, can require alternate approaches to learning for skills to be successfully transferred and applied. In contrast with the educational term *pedagogy* (the art and science of teaching children), *andragogy* is an adult learning theory that encompasses the art and science of teaching adults (Forrest & Peterson, 2006).

In the mid-1880s, Alexander Kapp coined the term *andragogy* as a description of Plato's educational theory (Darden, 2014), which aimed to produce a just and fair society on the basis of a graduated educational system that differentiated learning according to a person's innate capacities (Hobson, 1993). The name most associated with andragogy today is Malcolm Knowles (1980), whose theory recognized that the adult learner is independent and self-directed and has intrinsic motivation that transfers to real life. Furthermore, adult learners are goal-oriented, and the courses they take must be purposeful and practical (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007). Andragogy focuses on why adults take a course or undergo training in the first place and requires the instructor to actively involve adult learners in the process. The topic must be from the learner's perspective and of interest to them; they need to be aware of the importance of the content in which they are learning. Whereas children do not have an abundance of knowledge

and experience and at times need teacher-directed learning (Darden, 2014), adult learners require less structure.

Knowles' (1980) andragogic model is derived from four assumptions that are based on the concept that adult learners have the ability, need, and desire to control and be responsible for their learning. The four assumptions are that (a) adult learners' self-concepts move from dependency to independency or self-directedness, (b) they accumulate a reservoir of experiences from which to draw new knowledge and skills, (c) their readiness to learn increases with the developmental tasks of social roles, and (d) their time and curricular perspectives change from postponed to immediate application and from subject-centeredness to performance-centeredness (Darden, 2014). From an andragogic perspective, understanding that adults need to be actively involved in the learning process to construct their own knowledge, to make sense of the learning, and to apply what is learned is essential to considering how adults learn in the university setting and to improving coursework—it would make sense that programs (for this study, special education teacher preparation programs) should provide engaging learner-centered opportunities and experiences. Knowles (1984) emphasized that the principles of andragogy should facilitate learning rather than form a barricade and therefore must be used only when the adult is ready. Not every adult is ready to learn through these principles and in these situations; pedagogic principles can help the learner acquire foundational information first instead of learning in a less structured environment. Self-motivation and self-efficacy must be apparent for adults to engage in self-directed learning (McGrath, 2009).

While understanding how adults learn best is beneficial for preparing qualified special education teachers, when teaching adult learners, the context of learning must also be considered. As aforementioned, special education teachers must be equipped to teach students with special needs in varying disabilities, from various backgrounds, and from varying geographical regions. Although within the research literature there are multiple studies that focus on teacher preparation in urban and suburban areas (i.e. Banks, Obiakor, & Algozzine, 2013; Hammerness, Williamson, & Kosnick, 2016; Matsko & Hammerness, 2014), there is less literature focusing on rural areas. However, teaching special education in a rural area involves unique complexities such as smaller populations with varying needs in a classroom and fewer resources as compared with teaching special education in an urban area (Ludlow, 2002). The following sections will highlight what the literature says about unique characteristics of the rural setting and preparing special education teachers for the challenges of teaching in a rural area.

Preparing Special Education Teachers in the Rural Setting

Preparing special education teachers to teach in the rural setting can be complicated. Azano and Stewart (2015) summarized the arguments of rural education advocates "that rural students represent a forgotten minority and that preparing teachers to meet the needs of rural learners marginalized by poverty and geographic isolation takes differentiated specialized training" (p. 1). Recruiting and retaining qualified special education teachers, however, is challenging for rural schools partly because of the lack of community amenities, geographic and professional isolation, lower salaries, and higher rates of poverty (Miller, 2012). The problem becomes even more complex when efforts to recruit teachers to work in rural schools result in

employing teachers who may not be adequately prepared to provide instruction that meets the needs of the students; this lack of preparedness can be harmful to the school. According to Azano and Stewart (2015), these unqualified teachers would have to be replaced, exacerbating the lack of qualified staff and "creating a revolving door at the head of the classroom" (p. 1). Exposing preservice teachers to the realities of rural life, both the positive and the negative, can be effective and even necessary to develop rural educators who understand the culture and communities in which the students live (Butler, 2012).

Characteristics of the rural United States. To discuss the complexities that rural areas present for special education teachers, it is important to understand the demographic characteristics of rural communities in the United States. Of the 13,103 regular local school districts in the United States, 7,341 (56%) are located in one of the three locales defined as rural (Howley, Howley, Rhodes, & Yahn, 2014). Rural communities are generally characterized by their small size; low-density populations; limited choices for resources such as shopping, schools, and medical services; distance from population concentrations; and an economic reliance on agricultural industries and occasionally tourism (Monk, 2007). However, a rural community might be small but densely settled, and assuming that *rural* implies small can be problematic—sometimes large, centralized school districts serve geographically sizeable rural settings (Monk, 2007). It is also important to consider that rural communities can have severe problems with impoverishment. High-poverty school districts often face many obstacles that are related to the success of the student; these obstacles include limited financial resources and difficulty recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers (Goldhaber, Lavery, & Theobald, 2015).

The rural special education classroom. The remote locations and geographically large districts of some rural areas can pose distinct challenges for special educators. In rural special education, the low number of special needs students can mean smaller caseloads and fewer students to manage, but it can also mean that a single teacher is one of the few special educators in his or her school or district with the certification to provide services in the school or district—or he or she might even be the only special educator providing services in several schools (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). A dearth of qualified special education teachers can negatively affect academic outcomes and the quality of services provided to children with disabilities and their families (Miller, 2012). As a result of his study, Miller (2012) suggests that most special education teachers' ability to teach students with special needs improves within the first five years; however, rural schools rely heavily on beginning teachers to fill open positions. As retention rates, especially during the first five years of a teacher's career, are lower in rural schools than in suburban schools and many teachers leave rural areas and choose to teach special education in suburban schools just as they complete the on-the-job learning curve of those first years, many rural school suffer from losing special education teachers (Miller, 2012). As such, it is imperative that special education teacher preparation programs train preservice teachers effectively and at the same time, help them to understand the realities of teaching in the rural setting.

In addition to considering the unique challenges of rural special education, and preparing preservice teachers for the challenges, it is of utmost importance to understand the components of special education teacher preparation that are recommended to prepare new teachers for the

field. Although research has been conducted to determine the best methods for training special education teachers for the field, the shaping of special education teacher preparation is still needed. For example, Mackie (1960) surveyed approximately 100 superior special education teachers to determine the areas of competency needed to become an effective special education teacher. The survey determined that the main areas of expertise necessary to be successful include (a) practical teaching, (b) clinical experiences, (c) planned observations of teachers of students with special needs, and (d) the use of tests and records. Furthermore, the study provided recommendations to improve teacher preparation in special education: (a) ensure that college faculty have outstanding, specialized qualifications to impart the technical knowledge needed to assist in the development of skills for future teachers; and (b) colleges and universities should use the results of the study as a guide to strengthen the curriculum**.** Although researchers identified these needs even before IDEA was enacted in 1975, these concerns are still reflected in the work of current scholars who strive to improve teacher preparation in special education**.**

Essential components of special education teacher preparation. To determine what constitutes essential components of a special education teacher preparation program, it was found that McCall, McHatton, and Shealey (2014) conducted a systematic review of the literature ranging from the year 2000 to 2013 on preparing special education teachers for the field. The authors found 790 unique articles on the topic of teacher preparation in special education. They determined that 74 articles provided recommendations on preparing special education teachers, which allowed them to derive themes for essential components for preparing teachers for the field. The themes for preparing special education teachers for the field included

(a) the necessary skills and knowledge related to academics, behavior, and collaboration, (b) the authentic experiences which allow application of knowledge and skills while offering assessment of the candidate's growth as an educator, and (c) important dispositional factors, including attitudes about disability, inclusion, and diversity. As a result, the following sections are organized into the respective themes of the McCall, and colleague's (2014) comprehensive review.

Necessary skills and knowledge. Effective special education teacher preparation programs should deliver a "conscious blending of theory, disciplinary knowledge, subject-specific pedagogical knowledge, and practice," which will provide the base from which the learner can grow (Brownell et al., 2005, p. 243). Recommendations from the literature include understanding how to write Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), using instructional technology to promote student learning, and building networks of support (Lee, Patterson, & Vega, 2011). Smith, Robb, West and Tyler (2010) recommended elements of knowledge and experience in a teacher preparation program, including (a) being exposed to a variety of research-based strategies to assist in preparation for the demands of serving students with special needs, (b) having knowledge and experiences to promote the ability to select specific instructional methods and to implement them with fidelity, and (c) understanding the three-tiered approach to instruction. Additionally, programs that facilitate a high degree of faculty–student collaboration and focus on instructional methods and knowledge for addressing student diversity result in better outcomes for beginning special educators (Brownell et al., 2005).

Authentic experiences. In addition to knowledge and skill development, quality special education teacher preparatory programming need to provide carefully designed clinical experiences that allow preservice teachers to integrate information they are learning in coursework (Brownell et al., 2005; Lee & Haegele, 2016). According to Phillion, Miller, and Lehman (2005), clinical experience is the best approach to preparing future teachers for the complexity of the special education classroom. However, university faculty often face challenges in placing preservice teachers in clinical experience where they can observe and work with students with special needs while receiving the proper mentoring and necessary learning experiences (Billingsley & Scheuermann, 2014).

Special education teacher preparation in rural areas should be more intensive given the greater number of obstacles in rural settings. However, the problem of inadequate training is sometimes magnified as there may be a shortage of appropriate clinical placements because of the few special education teachers available to act as cooperating teachers. Further complications are presented in rural areas, given that the rural special education teacher must understand how to work with a compilation of disabilities simultaneously and often singlehandedly (Billingsley & Scheuermann, 2014). Most important, well-prepared special education teachers who are ready to serve in rural areas are needed across the nation. As preservice teachers enter the field, it is critical for them to have learned and experienced optimal clinical experience in multiple geographical regions to help them navigate and be successful in the field regardless of where they are teaching.

Morewood and Condo (2012) found that providing clinical experiences (they did not specify rural, urban, or suburban) for teacher candidates was essential to success in the special education classroom. Through the results of the case study, the subjects' perceptions of important elements of teacher preparation in special education included (a) undergoing practical, authentic teaching experiences that involved teaching in the inclusionary setting; and (b) understanding how to write IEPs to prepare for using them in the field. Because teacher candidates were given the opportunity to master knowledge through coursework and then apply that knowledge with a host teacher at a local rural school, they were able to appreciate what they learned and could effectively apply it in the classroom (Morewood & Condo, 2012).

Preservice special education teachers must also know how to manage classroom staff. In Brock and Carter's (2015) study, the authors determined that using paraprofessionals in the classroom can be of utmost value not only to the special education teacher but also to their students. However, if the special education teacher does not understand how to properly guide and support the paraprofessional, the partnership that could be made with the support staff could become a lost opportunity for the paraprofessional, special education teacher, and the students. Teaching preservice teachers to plan for and manage classroom support staff is a skill that needs to be taught in teacher preparation in special education. Brown and Stanton-Chapman (2015) also provided insight for how the relationship of a teacher and paraprofessional can be formed. A teacher can alleviate the feeling of subservience that paraprofessionals experience by including them in academic classroom roles and offering training programs and advising. Empowering a paraprofessional may be key to reducing the educational gap for students with special needs. As

quality special education teacher preparatory coursework and field experiences allow preservice teachers to integrate information they are learning on campus into the clinical setting (including learning how to manage classroom staff), they may begin to transfer their learning to the field (Brownell et al., 2005).

Dispositional factors. Because the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) mandated that students with disabilities be educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), schools must make inclusive placement decisions for children with disabilities (Kamens, 2007). According to Kamens (2007), this means that general education teachers and special education teachers are being asked to collaborate and co-teach in an environment that provides two or more professionals jointly delivering substantive instruction to a diverse or blended group of students, including those with special needs in a single physical space. Kamens (2007) reported that many institutions of higher education have begun to restructure their teacher education programs to better prepare general and special education preservice teachers for inclusive classroom practice and the demands of collaborating within a co-taught inclusive setting.

Special education teacher preparation programs also need to provide opportunities for preservice teachers to learn how to work effectively with students with special needs and their families (Murray et al., 2013). Developing empathy and a respect toward people with disabilities is important for a preservice teacher's training in both coursework and clinical experiences (Silverman, 2007). Understanding diverse learners relies on the teacher's ability to work with parents or guardians of children with special needs and it is essential that special education

teacher preparation programs include exposure to strategies for how to work with parents (Cyr, McDiarmid, Halpin, Stratton, & Davis-Delano, 2012). Also, gaining background knowledge on both students with special needs and their families can be advantageous because culturally relevant instruction could help improve achievement (Cyr et al., 2012). Many times—even though the intention of teacher preparation in special education is to prepare the preservice teacher for the field—when the proper dispositions are not mastered, inconsistencies with managing relationships which require compassion may severely hinder the performance of new special education teachers.

Important to note under dispositions, but not found in the literature on special education teacher preparation (although important to this study) is the research regarding building relationships with students. The following section reviews literature on the importance of making connections with students:

Relationships. Relationships are an integral part of the educational experience because they provide further insight into cultural and social factors that influence how students with special needs learn and how educators can best reach them. A positive student–teacher relationship greatly contributes to a positive learning experience. A student may thrive or fail under the tutelage of one teacher more than another. Yet, a strong connection between a student and a teacher can be difficult to achieve (Boyes, 2013). Teachers must understand that teachers lead the relationship by transferring knowledge, sharing wisdom, and providing direction; however, in addition to teaching skills, an astute teacher will also consider the emotional and psychological needs of the student and make adjustments accordingly. Ultimately, if a teacher

realizes the inherent personality differences between students and embraces these differences rather than attempting to change them, an appreciation or empathy may develop that makes the student more receptive to instruction (Boyes, 2013). Classroom teachers need to create an environment in which students can attain a sense of belonging while at the same time allow students to feel that they have some control over their academic success (Hinton, Warnke, & Wubbolding, 2011).

The teacher's ability to build relationships with students and make positive connections impacts all aspects of classroom life. Sturtevant (2014) defined a few characteristics of building an effective relationship as being available, caring (and showing it), acting warm and welcoming, showing a true interest in students, and being a great listener. Sturtevant (2014) also defined ways not to act toward students, which included advice not to act like a peer, demand respect, try too hard to be liked, and be unable to say "no." As special education preservice teachers learn the essential skills of becoming successful and continue to grow as educators, they may eventually blossom into experts in the field.

As professionals and policymakers work together to improve services for students with special needs, it is critical to determine what constitutes essential knowledge, skills, and authentic experiences and dispositions so that each special education teacher has the opportunity to become well trained. Perhaps at no other time in U.S. history has teacher preparation been under such scrutiny and held to such incredibly high expectations (Kennedy, Alves, & Rodgers, 2015). In response, teacher preparation programs are expected to cultivate, implement, and consider efficient methods to train special education preservice teachers to understand and

implement best practices for teaching and supporting students with special needs (Maheady et al., 2014). However, understanding the perceptions of those planning to teach special education, and those already in the field is important to consider as the field works to make progress and improve special education teacher preparation. The following section reviews a few of the minimal number of perceptions studies that exist on the topic.

Special education preservice teacher perception. In consideration of the unique needs of the adult learner and the complexities of the field of special education and the field of special education teacher preparation, educators must understand how to carefully impart instruction and field experience for preservice teachers. Undergraduate students' planning to become special educators may possess a certain perception of what the job will entail. Determining how those perceptions compare to the realities of the field is important to understand. Lee and colleagues (2011) investigated the perceptions of new special education teachers by surveying 154 intern teachers. The results of the survey revealed the intern teachers' perception that university instructors should offer course content that meets the most immediate needs of intern teachers (e.g., behavior management) early in the university's program. Furthermore, Lee and colleagues (2011) found that the surveyed interns believed "university programs need to assess intern teachers' knowledge and instructional experience in order to deliver instruction that closes gaps while broadening and enhancing teaching skills" (p. 72). Last, the researchers learned that intern teachers wished to continually observe teachers and classrooms and be provided with courses that involve fieldwork. The researchers explained that the exposure to working with students

with special needs increased student motivation by allowing them to reflect on their own teaching practices and apply their new learning skills to real settings (Lee et al., 2011).

In the literature, the use of perception surveys has yielded some answers on how to improve special education teacher preparation. For example, Lee and colleagues (2011) surveyed 154 preservice teachers to determine how they perceived self-efficacy and their readiness for the field. The results of the study showed that the preservice teachers' self-confidence in skills and knowledge about teaching special education seemed to be related to their perceived teaching efficacy.

Practicing special education teacher perception. In regard to understanding the perceptions of special education teachers practicing in the field and their views of their special education teacher preparation programs, Conderman and colleagues (2013) conducted a study to investigate special education teacher preparation program completers' perceptions of the program they attended and found that each of the respondents believed their clinical experience was beneficial to their training for the field. Although evidence of a special education teacher perception study was found in the work of Berry and Gravelle (2013) as it highlights the perceived needs of special education teachers regarding the positive and negative aspects of teaching in rural schools, I did not locate in the literature any perception studies relating to students either preparing to work in a rural setting or who are completing their preparatory work in a rural setting.

Limitations within the Literature

Within the literature, a limited research on the perceptions of both veteran and preservice special education teachers regarding teacher preparation in special education was found. Consequently, research about veteran special education teachers' and preservice special education teachers' perceptions of the essential components of a special education teacher preparation may shed light on improving teacher preparation in special education, specifically for those working in and preparing to work in rural settings. Examining perceptions of what veteran and preservice special education teachers believe to be the essential elements of a preparatory program may help provide more effective experiences in coursework and the clinical practice necessary for a teacher to survive and thrive in the field.

As the field of special education matures, continued research on the topic of improving special education teacher preparation is needed. Therefore, this study focuses on determining what veteran and preservice special education teachers believe are indispensable experiences when a student is learning to become a special education teacher.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

I used a qualitative approach to gather and analyze data and to explore the perceptions of veteran and preservice special education teachers and their stories about special education teacher preparation. In this study, I gathered reflections of experienced events from both veteran and preservice teachers as well as recorded my own thoughts and reflections through field notes and memos to answer my research question: "What do veteran and preservice special education teachers believe are indispensable experiences when a student is learning to become a special education teacher?" The study consisted of (a) open-ended surveys collected from both veteran and preservice teachers in rural areas and from me as the researcher, (b) follow-up interviews, and (c) my own narrative perspective as the data analysis unfolded. These three components of the study are discussed in the next several sections.

Open-Ended Survey

The open-ended survey questions for this study focused on gathering data on what veteran and preservice special education teachers believe are indispensable in both coursework and clinical experiences to better prepare special education teachers for the field. Through this study, I gathered stories, reflections, opinions, roles, and experiences of the participants' journeys in special education. The participant section describes specific information about the survey participants.

Interviews

In this study, I used interviews to corroborate responses to the open-ended survey questions. When an open-ended survey is utilized as a method of data collection, participants might reveal ideas, experiences, and attitudes that necessitate further examination. As part of the study design and as a method of triangulation, I contacted select respondents to participate in a follow-up interview. Six interviewees (two from each group: veteran teachers, preservice teachers with 80 hours of experience or more, and preservice teachers with 30–79 hours of experience) were selected based on their indication on the survey that they were willing to participate in an interview and the need to elicit further information on a particular topic in the open-ended survey.

Principal Investigator's Role

As a part of the study's design, my perspective became an important element of the study. Teaching has been my full-time career for 24 years; 16 of these were and still are currently spent as a special education classroom teacher. I was involuntarily moved from general education middle school social studies into special education, granted emergency certification, and decided to gain the full credentialing to stay in the field. I possess an undergraduate degree in elementary education, a Master's of special education, a second Master's of middle-level education, an education specialist certification in educational leadership, and eligibility for full director of special education. My graduate work focused on the area of teaching, learning disabilities, and special education law.

As a part of my education specialist program, I completed an internship from which I

chose to develop a special education learning disabilities endorsement program for a local college and see it through to its approval from the state of Michigan. For two years, I taught as an adjunct instructor in the newly developed program and secured a full-time position as director of special education teacher preparation in 2015. In addition to my college faculty position, I spend two hours per day teaching special education at the local school. Teaching in the school classroom also provides me with real-time engagement.

As the Director of Special Education Teacher Preparation at the small liberal arts college in the Midwestern United States, I am responsible for the training of the special education preservice teachers and am the only full time special education faculty, however two veteran special educators serve as adjunct professors in the program. The 36 credit learning disabilities endorsement program is cohort based and the groups move through the program which leads to 14 weeks of special education student teaching, eight weeks with a learning disabilities endorsed teachers and then the final six weeks working and teaching in a cognitively impaired (two weeks), emotionally impaired (two weeks), hearing impaired classrooms (two weeks). Having developed the program, serving as its director, and teaching the classes, it was important to me to be a part of this study.

Part of the design for this study was the intentional choice to include myself as a participant. As the principal investigator, I was the data collector and was responsible for identifying and contacting survey respondents, conducting the interviews, analyzing the data, and writing the analysis. I had a unique set of roles and perspectives coinciding with this research, as I was able to provide perspective as a veteran special education teacher; work directly with

preservice special education teachers in their coursework and clinical experiences; and write, develop, and have approved at the state level a special education teacher preparation program in which the preservice teachers from this study are enrolled. Therefore, it is important to understand my perspectives and experiences in this area of study because it is through the lens of those experiences that the data were analyzed and interpreted. It would be difficult to separate these valuable roles and perspectives from the role of the researcher; therefore, I made the intentional choice to incorporate myself into the study. Because of my experiences, I compared and contrasted my own beliefs with the responses of both the surveys and the interview answers. However, it is important to note that my reflections were not just a compilation of my experiences but that they evolved as the study progressed and the themes arose from the data; I added my perspective to the results during the research study.

In my role as researcher, I completed the survey before sending it to the respondents to reflect on my experiences and to establish a baseline of my knowledge and experience. My expectations were that my perspective would be similar to that of the veteran teachers, detailed with first-hand experiences of my perceptions of teaching special education. I expected all preservice teachers to have varying perspectives on what it entails to be an effective special education teacher compared with the perspectives of the veteran special education teachers. I analyzed my survey answers and compared them with the veteran teacher's survey responses. Last, I compared my results with the full data set to determine where my perspectives were consistent or inconsistent with the veteran teachers' results. Although my perspectives were important, I was also eager to see how the data might differ from my experiences.

Setting

The study occurred in a rural area of central Michigan. Collectively, the local schools in the two-county area employ 136 special education teachers who provide services to 2,454 special education–eligible students, from birth to age 26, in the 2015–2016 school year. The categories of special education of the survey respondents included teachers who teach in resource rooms, severely to moderately cognitively impaired classrooms, and deaf and hard-of-hearing classrooms. The undergraduate students who participated in the study each attended a small liberal arts college with a student enrollment of 1,140 students. Each was enrolled in a special education learning disabilities endorsement program intended to prepare them for teaching in a resource room or co-taught setting in which they may be responsible for servicing students with varying disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities, cognitive impairment, visual impairment, hearing impairment, autism, otherwise health-impaired). The education department at the college consists of four full-time tenure or tenure-track faculty, one contracted full-time instructor, and several adjunct education faculties. Of the 78 students seeking Michigan teaching certification in this program, 25 plan to also complete the special education endorsement. Although in the future the students enrolled in the endorsement program will be given an opportunity to gain urban field placement experience, at the time of the survey, each had only acquired field experience in a rural area.

Sampling Procedures and Participants

The sample for this study was intentional and purposeful. I specifically targeted rural veteran special education teachers with eight or more years of rural teaching experience and

preservice teachers studying to become special education teachers at a college in a rural area in central Michigan. The veteran and preservice special education teachers recruited for this study worked and studied in a rural community in central Michigan. All veteran teachers were employed in rural districts. All districts are similar in geography with slight differences in social demographics, and the populations in these districts ranged from 266 to 3,565 students.

To identify veteran teachers, I used the directory of special education teachers from the local intermediate school district to secure the e-mail addresses of veteran special education teachers working the rural central Michigan area. I used the online Michigan certification database to determine how long each teacher had possessed a special education teacher certification. The open-ended survey asked veteran special education teacher respondents for the number of years of service in special education, and teachers with fewer than eight years of service were disqualified from the electronic survey. The cutoff point of establishing the criteria of veteran teacher at eight years of experience was made due to the limited number of veteran teachers with more than 10 years of experience. The survey was sent to 54 veteran special education teachers with eight or more years of experience; 30 teachers completed the survey.

The undergraduate students selected for the study were enrolled in a special education teacher preparation program at a college in central Michigan. To provide a progressive perspective of respondents with increasing levels of experience in the data analysis, the preservice special education teachers were separated into two groups: Group A (12 students with 80 hours or more of special education clinical experience completed in the rural setting) and

Group B (13 students with 30–79 hours of special education clinical experience completed in the rural setting). See Table 1 for a breakdown of study participants in each group.

The undergraduate student participants as a whole included 25 preservice teachers enrolled in special education teacher preparation coursework at a college in the same geographic area where the veteran teachers work. I emailed each participant who fit the criteria for selection (enrolled in special education teacher preparation program, with 80 hours or more or 30–79 hours of special education clinical experience completed in the rural setting). I emailed preservice teachers a request to complete the survey with an electronic link to the survey. Each were enrolled in a course taught by me. All students from Groups A and B who were identified and invited to participate in the survey consented to participate in the study and completed the open-ended survey (see Table 1).

To ensure confidentiality, I assigned identification codes to each participant. V stands for veteran special education teachers (V1, V2, V3, …). Group A stands for preservice special education teachers with 80 hours or more of clinical experience in the field (A1, A2, A3, …). Group B stands for preservice special education teachers with 30–79 hours of clinical experience in the field (B1, B2, B3, …). Identification codes are used throughout the data analysis.

Sample characteristics. This study included 55 participants, of which 30 were veteran special education teachers (veterans group), 12 were preservice teachers with 80 hours or more of clinical experience completed (Group A), and 13 were preservice special education teachers with 30–79 hours completed (Group B). Data from all participants were incorporated in the

results. Each participant worked or studied in the field of special education in central Michigan. The characteristics of the veteran special education teacher sample are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that the participants have different levels of teaching experience. Although all of the teachers had eight or more years of experience, 13 of the teachers had more than 15 years. Of the 30 participants, 27 were female, and three were male.

The 12 students in Group A all had experience in the special education field ranging from 80 to 120 hours and were all classified as upperclassmen at the college. All students had completed a minimum of three courses in the sequence leading to the Michigan special education teacher endorsement. This group included 11 female participants and one male participant (see Table 3). Group B attended the same college; however, they had completed only one beginning course in the sequence and one 30-hour field placement experience. This group comprised 13 (10 females, three male) first-year students (see Table 4).

Procedures

Open-ended survey. I used the software Qualtrics to create the survey. I completed the survey first to record my own experiences of being a veteran special education teacher. Next, I distributed the survey by e-mail to the 54 veteran teachers, the 12 special education preservice teachers with 80 or more hours of field experience (Group A), and the 13 special education preservice teachers with 30–79 hours of field experience (Group B). Veteran special education teachers and preservice special education teachers completed open-ended surveys to describe their perceptions, lived experiences, and stories regarding special education. I e-mailed each respondent a link to the survey. I sent an e-mail reminder to respondents who did not complete

the survey within two weeks of receiving the original e-mail invitation. The survey asked the veteran teachers from rural areas to reflect on what essential knowledge and experiences contributed to their success and retention as special educators (see Appendix B). I sent the preservice teachers from Group A and Group B a similar survey that asked them to reflect on what they had learned thus far in their program and what they perceived to be essential knowledge and experiences that contributed to their success (see Appendix C). Participation in the study for each group of respondents was voluntary. All respondents (veteran and preservice teacher participants) who completed the survey received a $15 gift card. I mailed the gift cards by postal mail after participants successfully completed the survey. All participants provided informed consent before completing the survey (see Appendices D and E for the informed consent forms for all groups of participants).

The pilot survey (see Appendix A) was instrumental in formulating the final research question for the study and also in developing the open-ended survey questions. As a result, I developed the following research question to provide perspectives from those in the field and those entering the field: “What do veteran and preservice special education teachers believe are indispensable experiences when a student is learning to become a special education teacher?” I derived and developed the open-ended survey questions from the following subquestions guiding the research:

1. What are the essential coursework experiences for special education teacher preparation programs?

2. What are the essential clinical experiences for special education teacher preparation programs?

The 10 open-ended survey questions (see Appendices B and C) were intended to help answer the sub-questions.

Initial open-ended survey data analysis. Once the survey data were collected through Qualtrics, the data were downloaded into a Microsoft Word document and uploaded into NVivo 11. The qualitative data were analyzed using a descriptive coding data analysis supported by the software NVivo 11 (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I used NVivo 11 because the qualitative data software permits the researcher to code the data into nodes, which allow for categorization of the data. I used Miles and Huberman's (1994) coding process (see Figure 1) for data reduction, data display, and verification. Using the nodes in NVivo 11, I derived data from the open-ended survey responses as it was examined, studied, reduced, and organized. I will explain the data analysis process in more detail below. However, the initial open-ended survey data analysis allowed me to identify individuals for follow-up interviews.

Interview procedures. In each open-ended survey, I asked participants whether they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview and selected interview participants from those who agreed. I selected individuals to interview based on my desire to gather additional information as a result of specific participant survey responses and stories. As areas of interest related to the study arose, I contacted targeted interviewees by e-mail. Respondents were free to decline to be interviewed.

I developed a protocol of questions as I identified themes in the coding of the open-ended

survey data to seek further elaboration from respondents who had mentioned these topics in their open-ended survey responses. I conducted each interview at a location and time that the interviewee chose. Interviews with veteran teachers took place in their classrooms, and interviews with preservice teachers took place in my on-campus office. After I briefly discussed with the participants the purpose and parameters of the study, I asked them to sign a consent form (see Appendices F and G) and proceeded to the interview questions (see Appendices H and I). All interviews were audio-recorded. In each interview, after the first question and response, I tested the tape recording for volume and clarity. At the end of each interview, I encouraged the participant to offer any information that was not covered in the interview. I then transcribed and coded the interviews in adherence to the same procedure used for the open-ended survey (described in the next section), with the intention to provide clarity to the survey coding results.

Data Analysis

Once I collected the data, I used descriptive coding data analysis to analyze the qualitative data supported by the software NVivo 11 (Miles & Huberman, 1994). According to Miles and Huberman (1994), qualitative data analysis consists of the procedures detailed in Figure 1.

A coding structure. I followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) coding process highlighted in Figure 2. This included data reduction, data display, and verification.

Data reduction. Data reduction involves examining, studying, reducing, and organizing (e.g., coding relevant responses and discarding irrelevant data) the qualitative data from open-ended survey responses, interview transcripts, field notes, and observations.

Data display. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested that, to draw conclusions from the mass of data, it is essential to have an effective display of data, in the form of tables, charts, networks, and other graphical formats. This is a continual—rather than single—process to be carried out at the end of the data collection.

Conclusion drawing/verification. This part of the analysis process allows for drawing beginning conclusions on the research questions. These initial conclusions can then be verified; that is, their validity can be examined through reference to existing field notes or further data analysis and collection.

Stages of coding. Before looking at the data, I kept field notes of my own expectations of what the responses might be for each group for purposes of comparison. It was important for me to determine if my presumptions would change throughout the course of the study. Then, for the four separate data sets (veteran teacher, preservice teachers with 80 hours or more, preservice teachers with 30–79 hr, and my survey response), I completed the following seven stages:

Stage 1: Open coding. After I carefully read the data, I used NVivo 11 to sort the data on all statements relating to the research question. Related statements were identified and assigned a code, or category in NVivo 11. I kept field notes of my thoughts and observations as I moved through the open-coding process (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Stage 2: Axial coding. Using the codes developed in Stage 1, I reread the qualitative data and searched for statements that might fit into any of the categories. I also developed further codes throughout the axial coding to derive relationships between the codes. In addition, I continued to keep field notes of my thoughts and observations (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Stage 3: Operational model diagram. In this stage, I began to organize the four data sets (veteran teacher, preservice teachers with 80 hours or more, preservice teachers with 30–79 hours, and my survey response) in tables on the basis of emerging themes to prepare for comparison across the sample and to look for similarities and differences. I continued to keep field notes of my thoughts and observations (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

***Stage 4: Compare and contrast the data*.** In this stage, I began to search for evidence of distinctions and agreements and displayed the comparisons in a table. Distinctions (differences) or agreements (similarities) in perceptions between the special education preservice and veteran teachers would help me to determine whether the preservice teachers possessed an accurate perception of teaching special education in a rural setting. After all data were organized into tables, I sorted data from my perspectives into a separate column titled "The researcher's thoughts, observations, and reflections." At this point, a review of the data and a need for clarity prompted the interview questions.

***Stage 5: Prepare the interview questions*.** After comparing and contrasting the data, I identified possible interview participants and structured the interview questions. I identified areas where I wanted additional information or needed clarification. For example, as a result of a need for more information that was triggered by V21, a question about teaching special education in a rural setting was added. I continued to keep field notes of thoughts and observations.

Stage 6: Interview the participants. I created and asked questions that helped provide clarity to what I found in coding Stages 1–4. I continued to keep field notes of thoughts and

observations. I transcribed the interviews and used NVivo 11 to sort the data into the existing categories (nodes) to provide more data in the categories that needed clarity.

Triangulation of the data. As I analyzed the data, I compared the themes from the survey data from V, A, and B groups with the interview data from V, A, and B groups and looked for similarities and differences in the responses to determine if distinct differences in perception regarding teaching special education in a rural setting existed. Steps were taken to ensure that the processes were consistently used and are described below.

Step 1: Continual reflections of the researcher. Before and throughout the process of analyzing and coding the data from all four groups of respondents (veteran teachers, preservice teachers (two groups) and my own open-ended survey data responses), field notes were kept of my thoughts and observations on the data for the purpose of supporting the qualitative descriptive research so that I, as a veteran teacher and program director of special education at the university level, could provide my perspective on the study.

Step 2: Analyzed my perspective. To draw themes, I analyzed my perspective in contrast with the veteran special education teachers' perspectives and preservice teachers' perspectives from the surveys.

Step 3: ***Developed interview questions***. I analyzed the survey data and created questions on the basis of the need to elicit further explanation of the themes and topics that were found in the survey data and began a narrative analysis to determine relationships. The process helped to generate the central conclusions of the study, which were critical to the findings of the study (see Figure 2).

Institutional Review Board Consent

I obtained institutional review board consent for the study from both educational institutions involved in the study (see Appendices J and K).

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This study was designed to provide insight into the perceptions of both veteran and preservice special education teachers regarding what they believe are the essential experiences for undergraduate students preparing to become special education teachers. I also used my insights as a veteran teacher as a data set for comparison. The intention of conducting the study in a rural setting was to derive data that might help to prepare special education teachers for the unique and rigorous job of teaching special education in rural settings. The study's purpose was to answer the question, "What do veteran and preservice special education teachers believe are indispensable experiences when a student is learning to become a special education teacher?" The subquestions also addressed include the following:

1. What are the essential coursework experiences for special education teacher preparation programs?

2. What are the essential clinical experiences for special education teacher preparation programs?

To improve preparation both in coursework and in clinical fieldwork, I analyzed the data for themes. The themes that arose showed both commonalities and distinctions in the perceptions of the indispensable experiences for training teachers for the field of special education. The common themes, which were identified as four of the indispensable experiences essential to the training of preservice special education teachers, included exposure to and participation in (a) varying and multiple experiences in the clinical setting; (b) in-depth understanding of the IEP

process; (c) ongoing coaching of assessment practices and using data; and (d) a solid foundation of how to build relationships with students. Distinctions, or gaps, in perception included the importance of (a) an understanding of how to work with paraprofessionals and (b) experiences of how to work with parents (see Figure 3).

Themes of the Study

To begin to understand the perceptions of the veterans group, Group A (30-79 hours), and Group B (80+ hours) participants, as well as my own perceptions, and make sense of the data, the following section provides an overview of each of the common themes and types of common responses of the participants associated to each theme.

Varying and multiple ongoing experiences in the clinical setting. From all three sets of data (V, A, B), the participants of the survey and the interviews revealed that many study participants believe preservice teachers must have varying and multiple experiences in the clinical setting (see Appendix L). For example, V5 stated the following:

> I enjoyed the requirements of having to observe at different grade levels and job-shadow teachers in various schools. During my field experiences I visited the MOCI [Moderate Cognitive Impaired] program, EI [Emotionally Impaired] program, resource room setting, and an inclusion setting. I also visited students at the elementary level and at the high school level.

V13 concurred with the need for multiple settings and stated, “The experiences that were most beneficial were the ones that required me to be out in the field. Throughout my time in college, I had experience working in at least eight different classrooms.”

The need for a multitude of experiences was echoed throughout Groups A and B as well. For example, A8 described the opportunity to make connections between theory and practice thus, “Nothing beats actually doing something in a real live classroom that you've talked about in class and getting the opportunity to see those ideas and concepts actually at work,” In contrast, for A3 varied field experiences provided an orientation to what the realities of teaching would be, for example, “The placements have been super beneficial and opened my eyes as to what a job in this field would look like.” B6 summarized the importance of the variety of field experiences which contributed to revealing the importance of providing quality field experiences for preservice teachers:

> I would not know over half of what I do without field placement and physically interacting with students. My field placement has offered irreplaceable experiences that I would not have otherwise. I have sat in on IEP meetings, written mock IEPs, given assessments and learned how to come up with ways to get a student to be productive or new ways to help students through their coursework. No professor standing in front of a classroom could possibly pass on these experiences.

B8 emphasized the importance of active experiences and observations of action:

> I believe the 30+ hours that I have put into placement this semester has been the most beneficial for me. Getting hands on experience with students, and having [instructor name] there to help me through it has really helped me see what it’s going to be like when I have my own classroom. Another beneficial part was getting to sit in on an IEP.

> This helped me see what happens behind the scenes. I got to see the steps of what you talked about and listen to how you and the parent interacted.

I completed the veteran teacher survey before the launch of the survey to the veteran (V) and Groups A and B participants. I found that I also agreed that varying and multiple experiences are an essential component to special education teacher preparation. In my survey I stated:

> I wish I had been able to visit many different special education classrooms to make a decision on how I should run my own classroom. I wish I had a chance to work in a variety of classrooms across the categories as I work with many students who do not strictly fall in the learning disabilities category.

In addition, the interviews confirmed the validity of the theme *varying and multiple ongoing experiences in the clinical setting* in each group (V, A, B) (see Appendix L).

An in-depth understanding of the IEP process. Many veteran teachers reported that they would like to have had more experience in learning how to construct an IEP (see Appendix M). For example, V16 stated, "I wish I had more experience working with the IEP program that the schools in the area were using such as EasyIEP or other programs. I wish I had experience learning how to schedule meetings and run meetings," while V15 wrote, "I would also have liked to have written and run an IEP (or mock IEP) so that I went through the entire process." Although some participants were satisfied with their training in the IEP process, the veteran teachers' data revealed that the follow-through with the services that are supposed to be provided as a result of the IEP program is not always rendered. The survey data suggest that teacher

preparation in special education should to ensure that preservice teachers become advocates for the rights of students in the IEP and IEP process and understand the importance of diligently staying committed to the program planned for the student by the IEP team. V19 stated:

> My biggest disappointment is we make plans for students and we do not follow through with fidelity. In fact, I am sure some of the key players mentally make the choice not to follow the plan before they even leave the meeting room. IEPs are a joke. They are just a formality. Teachers entering the field need to understand that they must advocate for follow through and understand the laws that protect our kids.

The preservice teachers in this study have been enrolled in a special education teacher preparation program in which the IEP process unfolds over the course of four years. The 80-plus-hour group mostly reported they felt confident with the process and had begun to evaluate their knowledge against what they saw in the field. For example, A1 wrote, “Negatively, many teachers do not complete paperwork to the fullest potential. I found in one placement that I was more specific than the teacher was in completing these tasks.” However, students have also been exposed to the realities of an IEP team. A9 agreed that IEPs can be complicated:

> Whenever we talked about the IEP and the process and the team, I didn't realize how much tension could be between the team and how many different ideas people can have in order to try and ‘fix’ the kid with a need. Having people skills along with the knowledge is important in getting things accomplished in the IEP meetings with the team and the parents.

Group B students appeared to be building confidence with the IEP process. For example, B5 stated,

> What I am most looking forward to learning is how to make an IEP for a student done the right way and efficiently. I have had many teachers in high school tell me that there is way too much paper work in special education and that I will hate it. But I am choosing to learn the right way and to learn to do it in a way that is efficient and done correctly.

As the researcher, I also felt that understanding the IEP process was an indispensable experience for special education preservice teachers. In my survey, I wrote:

> I never learned how to run an IEP. I never sat in on an IEP. Today, when I run IEPs I wish I had learned how to navigate MDE's website to determine what changes are occurring in the IEP process rather than waiting for someone to tell me what to do.

The interviews from all groups (V, A, B) support this theme of *provide an in-depth understanding of the IEP process*. For example, V21 stated, “I just wish we had more coursework in how to develop good IEP goals and objectives of how you get there.” However, A2 stated:

> About IEPs and first learning to create IEPs and everything, I think was very beneficial because that's something that's obviously going to be very heavily in my career, but it's not something I can learn while doing it. That was the most beneficial thing, I think over all four years. That culminated special ed, learning how to create an IEP.

B6 concurred, stating, “As a student, it is important to me to have the knowledge of how IEPs work.”

Teach how to administer assessments and how to use the data. Themes arose in all data sets (V, A, B) to reveal the importance of understanding assessment (see Appendix N). The veteran teachers verified that assessment guides instruction and is essential to teaching special education students. For example, V21 stated:

> Students must learn how to assess students and put them into appropriate learning levels. We spent a semester on learning assessments and how to put students in grade levels. I felt comfortable doing this. We learned a lot about different types of assessments including the Woodcock Johnson and the Brigance. We also learned about Slossan's Oral Reading Test and several math assessments. I was able to use this information to help support instruction as well.

V4 echoed V21 and verified that understanding assessment is an indispensable experience in teacher preparation in special education. She stated:

> Assessment! I was very interested in the data collection process while in classes and absorbed so much. I got to the classroom and I felt confident in reading the protocols and implementing various assessments. This was essential to my training.

Group A participants also perceived the importance of learning how to assess and use data. A11 stated:

> The experiences that have been the most beneficial to me have been the experiences in which I was actually able to work with a student. For instance, [instructor name] not only

> showed us how to give assessments, she allowed us to give the ESTR-J Revised, allowing for a more memorable experience.

A5 stated, "I was able to give the assessments and provide one on one supports for children which helped them meet their goals and supports their needs. This was important to my growth."

The students who had completed only 30 hours in the field also showed they understood the importance of assessment. B10 stated:

> In class we learned about different assessments that are given to test students' understanding of subjects like math or reading, and we learned how these assessments' results are used in IEPs. It was cool to be able to actually administer the tests to students and also to sit in on an IEP and notice the application of results of those tests.

B6 acknowledged, "Becoming familiar with the different assessments in class and then giving them during placement made me feel prepared. I knew the flow of the test, the instructions, and relatively how much time to give students to complete the questions."

In my survey, I also emphasized the importance of understanding assessment and felt I missed this indispensable experience in my own training. I stated, "I wish I had direct instruction of how to use the assessments and interpret the data to create an IEP. I learned this on my own and by trial and error."

The theme was reinforced after the interviewees responded about the importance of assessment. V21 stated, "There's not one assessment that you should be using. There's multiple tools," while A2 stated, "The End of Year EOY, Middle of Year MOY, Beginning of Year BOY assessment assignment was very beneficial because I learned how to truly plan out everything

which will be an incredibly important skill for me when teaching special education." B10 reported that learning assessment was critical for learning how to use data to drive instruction:

> When we administered the Brigance test, we learned how to do that in class, and what that would mean. In terms of what those scores meant. I administered a reading test, and then based on the scores, I could see what the students needed to work on, and then I could give them a lesson based on that. This is important to my training so I know what to do to begin individualizing instruction. (See Appendix N).

Emphasize the importance of building relationships. Understanding how to build a relationship with a special needs child was emphasized in all data sets (V, A, B; see Appendix O). For example, V17 confirmed the importance of building rapport in the following statement:

> I think first and foremost if a special education teacher wants to impact a student's learning he/she must first develop a rapport with the student. The student must come to trust the special education teacher. When the student knows that the teacher is on their side and can trust them, then the teacher can make an impact on the student. Developing a positive relationship with the student is critical. I'm not sure how you teach that to preservice special education teachers. For some teachers I think it comes naturally. Unfortunately, we have all seen teachers who have never developed it or embraced it. It usually is not a good situation. Fortunately, it is a skill that can be developed over time I believe.

V18 also mentioned the importance of students feeling that their teacher believes in their success:

> By understanding my clientele, and working to design day-to-day experiences to build toward their future success, I was able to gain the respect of students who recognized someone wanting them to succeed. Many secondary special education students need first to learn that someone believes in them before choosing to risk believing in themselves.

Group A participants also recognized the importance of relationships. A6 talked of the complications with learning that can result with a relationship is not formed:

> In my opinion, students will work for you if they know the teacher cares about them. This comes in all forms. If I barked orders and demanded every student sit in their chair and immediately get to work, I`d be met with resistance. If I asked students how their weekend was, or their day or about other classes and show genuine interest, students will be less resistant.

A5 echoed the importance of a trusting relationship between a special education teacher and student:

> I believe that special educators could show the students they care by building personal relationships with each child creating trust and comfort. I believe this can be taught by (a) telling why it is important and how it is implemented (b) by modeling this behavior as a professor to the preservice special educators and as a teacher in the special education rooms.

Group B participants echoed the need for building relationships when working with students with special needs. B5 stated:

> There are many things that a special education teacher can do to impact their students' learning, the first of which is building a relationship. Without a relationship to the student, the student will feel no extra desire to do work or make any effort if they feel that it will not be appreciated. This can be taught to preservice special education teachers by explaining the impact of relationships, and demonstrating it through field placement experience.

B4 echoed B5 in explaining the importance of listening and showing interest in a student with special needs:

> A time that I had after I got into the classroom for field placement that demonstrated for me that I was prepared and it was something I knew I could use was one of the students just did not want to work with me that day and he was struggling in some subjects. I let him talk for a couple minutes and managed to tie it in with the subject we needed to work on and then he started to work with me. Building that relationship is key.

As the researcher and a veteran teacher, I also discussed the importance of a teacher's relationship with a student with unique differences:

> Each student is a puzzle that needs individualized problem solving. I wish my professors would have explained to me to choose my battles, and to let some things go depending on the need of the child…that will help with building a relationship in my opinion and experience.

The data from the interview confirmed the theme and continued to emphasize the importance of relationships with students with special needs. In the interview, V21 stated:

> I always think it takes almost a year to get to know your student fully before you're at that aha moment where you can say, 'Now I know where we need to go. We were missing this, or we need to do this better.' Once the relationship is formed and the students know you, then will work for you.

The Group A interviewee also stressed the importance of relationship and the keys to building a bond. A8 stated:

> I think the keys to building that relationship for me is to give as much respect to the student as you can or their wishes, when you can see their routine and how they prefer to do things in the classroom, to try not to push too hard. I like to remind my student just about every ten minutes if I see them doing something good or bad.

Even the most novice participant emphasized the importance of relationships with students. B10 stated, "It was really important to build a relationship with my student. I met him at his level, recognizing the things he did right, and then just suggesting ways that he could improve what he had" (see Appendix O).

Themes of the Veteran Teachers Only

While there were themes that spanned the four sample groups (veteran teachers, preservice teachers (two groups) and principle investigator, there were other themes that were only identified within the veteran teachers. These themes follow in the section below:

Provide experiences in working with parents. Veteran teachers, including me, emphasized the importance of understanding how to work with parents in the data (see Appendix

P). V5 discussed the importance of special education teacher preparation programs emphasis on helping preservice teachers understand the potential complexities of working with parents of students with special needs:

> I do not feel that my teaching program prepared me for working with my students' families either. At times my job is very heart-breaking, as I work with many families/students that have gone through so much hardship, and I feel as if I can never do enough.

V14 stated affirmed that helping preservice special education teachers is critical to their development:

> New teachers need to understand and be taught that the parents of their students often have the same problems as their children. They may have had horrible role models for parents themselves. It helps when I remember that. They need to understand that empathy and direction are often needed for the parents.

From my perspective as a veteran teacher, in my survey I discussed that I learned the importance of working with parents later in my career and not during my special education teacher preparation program. I stated:

> It took me a long time to learn the importance of working with parents and building a trusting relationship. This includes saying hello in the grocery store and engaging in conversation with them about their child. It has been so important to share the good news about the child on a continual basis, that way when the bad news comes, they trust you.

This theme was also confirmed in the interviews with the veteran teachers. In the interview, V4 revealed the importance of teaching preservice special education teachers how to talk with parents:

> It is so important to understand how to work with parents. I'm thinking of a specific situation in my first year of teaching when I first got my classroom and I asked myself, how do I talk with this parent who is considering that her child may fall under the ability of special education? I would say that was probably one of the harder things that I think I probably had to do my first year of teaching compared to anything else…new teachers need to be coached on how to work with a parents and understand what to say to them.

While the veteran teachers identified working with families as essential, the preservice teachers did not mention any supporting data for this theme (see Appendix P).

An understanding of how to work with paraprofessionals. Another distinction between the participant groups appeared in the data regarding working with paraprofessionals. Some veteran teachers who participated in the survey stressed the importance of understanding how to work with paraprofessionals and manage classroom staff whereas none of the participants in Group A or Group B mentioned the importance of working with paraprofessionals or managing classroom staff (see Appendix Q). V1 stated, "In my coursework, I was not prepared for handling parent issues, or managing and utilizing paraprofessional staff. These are all skills that I needed to learn," whereas V20 wrote:

> My first teaching position was working in a classroom at a center-based program for emotionally challenged kids. It was so far removed from what I had learned in college.

> For one thing I was in charge of five paraprofessionals. There had been no coursework about that.

In my survey, I also mentioned the importance of paraprofessionals in the classroom. I stated,

> I believe paraprofessionals can be utilized best for one-on-one instruction, but they could also start a class and be empowered to help teach. When I first entered special education, I had the parapros grade papers and walk kids to the bathroom for monitoring, however, I now utilize them for their strengths and train them to teach with me. They are always assigned a group of kids to work with and I listen for their recommendations.

The interviews conducted for this study confirmed the importance of understanding how to work with paraprofessionals and making sure preservice teachers are learning this skill in special education teacher preparation. V4 stated:

> Additionally, I never learned to work with parapros in my undergraduate work. With my current job, my parapros serve as my left and right hand. It is a relief to have them work with me in my room. It took me a while to learn to utilize them.

In summary, working with parents and paraprofessionals were the only two themes that were distinct between the veteran and preservice teachers. I did not find any themes in the preserve group that were specific to only the preservice teachers; each of the themes that were identified in the preservice teacher data were evident within the veteran teacher responses.

Teaching Special Education in Rural Areas

The methods of this study allowed me to use the survey data to construct interview questions from which I could elicit more information in the form of an interview (see Appendix H and I). A question was created on the topic of teaching special education in a rural setting. In the open-ended survey data, V21 alluded to the restrictions that rural areas present for special education teachers:

> At the high school I was flying solo and had to figure out many things on my own. I reached out to who I could but working in a rural area, the next school is 50 miles away. I had the opportunity to collaborate once a month if I was lucky.

This survey answer from V21 triggered the interview question, "Do you foresee there might be unique challenges to teaching special education in a rural area as opposed to in a more urban environment? If so, what are they?" as I found V21's survey responses to revolve around how the isolation of the rural area affects teaching special education. I specifically chose to select my sample from teachers working and students studying in a rural area; however, I found that V21 was the only participant who mentioned anything on his or her own about rural education. When designing the open-ended survey, I purposefully chose not to include any questions on rural education in order not to lead the participants and to see if they would bring up rural factors without being prompted. However, because rural special education was a focus of my study and because only one participant mentioned rural factors, I intentionally made the decision to follow-up with the interview participants in this area (see Appendix R). To explore this, I crafted and asked each of the six interviewees an interview question on their perceptions of teaching special

education in a rural area. The respondents (V, A, and B) echoed unique challenges which included working with the same students in multiple subjects for numerous hours, playing many roles in the students' life, and often working without collaboration of other special education teachers. For example, V21 stated:

> In rural schools, you're smaller, so a lot of times the Special Ed department is a one-person solo job, which some people can handle, but it takes a team to develop a good solid plan for a Special Ed child.

V4 also affirmed the need to understand that they will be responsible for many roles in the students' lives. She stated:

> From my perspective in the rural area, I learned that you certainly cannot be just one person. Which that's not what they ever taught me in my teacher preparation program… they always tell us that special education would be taught in collaboration, consultation, all those different key words. I would have to say the reality of being not only a teacher but being a mom to these students. I also play role of a social worker, to being a counselor, to being a dad figure sometimes to the boys. I guess being that whole piece that the students need. I even teach them how to do the whip and the nay nay, the dance.

Another Group A student emphasized that more time with students due to possibly being the only special education teacher in the building may mean having a stronger relationship with those students. A8 stated:

> In the rural area I believe there would be more opportunity to build a relationship with the students as you might have them for more of the day and for multiple subjects.

The most novice group of preservice teachers in this study, those in Group B, could also identify unique challenges of teaching special education in a rural setting. B6 stated:

> From what I have seen in the rural area, I think I would need to be jack-of-all-trades and teach everything all day. I may have to teach more than one grade at one time, and have a mix of ... if I'm at a high school, freshman through seniors.

Summary

The study's purpose was to answer the question, "What do veteran and preservice special education teachers believe are indispensable experiences when a student is learning to become a special education teacher?" The data revealed four themes that spanned across all the participant groups and two themes that revealed distinctions in the groups; all six addressed indispensable experiences necessary for special education preservice teachers:

- Varying and multiple experiences in the clinical setting
- In-depth understanding of the IEP process
- Ongoing coaching of assessment practices and using data
- A solid foundation of how to build relationships with students
- An understanding of how to work with paraprofessionals
- Experiences of how to work with parents

In addition, the themes provide information to answer the subquestions of this study:

1. What are the essential coursework experiences for special education teacher preparation programs?

2. What are the essential clinical experiences for special education teacher preparation programs?

As I sorted the data and the themes appeared, it was clear that each theme could help determine essential coursework and clinical experiences that should be a part of the teacher preparation in special education program, specifically for teachers preparing to teach in rural areas. In addition, the specific interview question on rural education provided insight on the complexities of teaching special education in a rural area which included helping special education preservice teachers to gain a perspective on the uniqueness of serving the same students for multiple hours across multiple subjects, playing numerous roles in the life of the special needs child, and often planning services without the collaboration or help of other special education teachers

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

Purpose of the Study

This descriptive qualitative study aimed to explore what veteran and preservice teachers perceive to be essential adult learner–oriented coursework and experience for those preparing to become special education teachers. Results indicated the following six elements of coursework and experience are indispensable from the perspective of veteran and pre-service educators: (a) varying the field placement experience, (b) understanding the IEP process, (c) learning assessment, (d) knowing how to build relationships with students (e) the importance of working with parents and (f) knowing how to work with paraprofessionals. Subsequently, I will discuss an overview of the findings and recommendations for educational leaders, recommendations for future studies, and an acknowledgement of the limitations of the study.

Varying and Multiple Experiences in the Clinical Setting

Each of the groups (V, A, B) revealed they perceive varying and multiple ongoing experiences in the clinical setting to be indispensable experiences for special education preservice teachers. This is consistent with the literature that states clinical experiences have been found to assist students to become qualified special education teachers (Conderman & Katsiyannis, 2012; Morewood & Condo, 2012; Wasburn-Moses, 2009). Field placements should range not only from elementary to middle and high school but also across the special education categories (e.g., rooms for children with emotional impairment, autism, severe multiple

impairment, co-taught). In my own survey responses, I too discussed experiences in the clinical setting as essential to the training of the preservice teacher. I believe that it is essential to complete clinical fieldwork in varying settings and to have experience with teaching students in as many categories as possible as they learn to manage and problem-solve learning for students with special needs.

Preparing to serve special needs children. Even though a special education teacher may only possess a certification in one area (e.g., learning disabilities), it is not uncommon that the teacher will serve students with a range of disabilities and academic aptitude at the same time. Wasburn-Moses (2009) found some of the most common roles of special education teachers include facilitating inclusion, managing behavior, and doing paperwork, the author noted that these skills are often hard to teach without an effective clinical setting in which preservice special education teachers can see models of actual practice. Therefore, it is important that special education teacher preparation programs include experiences such as co-teaching, writing IEPs, and participating in Functional Behavior Assessments to expose preservice teachers to these essential skills.

To facilitate providing effective, authentic clinical experiences, Wasburn-Moses (2009) stated that creating partnerships between institutions of higher education and K–12 schools is critical. However, breakdowns in teacher education transpire when the vision of teaching and learning presented in teacher preparation programs clashes with those found in K–12 schools (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005). To overcome the historical separation of these entities, institutions of higher education, school administration, and policymakers must form strong

partnerships at all levels, including preservice teacher preparation. Partnerships are likely to result in the facilitation of a unified vision of possibilities for teaching and learning in special education (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005). Creating university partnerships with area schools which provide quality clinical experiences may help to effectively alleviate the conflicting models and help to facilitate preservice teacher learning (Carlson et al., 2007; Howell et al., 2013).

In-depth Understanding of the Individual Education Program (IEP) Process

According to the participants in all sample groups, the indispensable experience of providing preservice teachers with an in-depth understanding of the IEP process is essential to their growth. According to the veteran teacher sample, as the preservice teachers begin their careers as special education teachers, they must know how to plan for and write IEPs as well as how to communicate and work with parents and allied service providers. They may be responsible for running an IEP from beginning to end starting with their first day on the job. They must also adhere to the timelines and guidelines regulated at the federal, state, and local levels. According to the data, providing experiences that allow special education preservice teachers to learn to effectively manage the IEP process is essential to their growth during their training to become special education teachers. This is echoed in the literature. For example, Lee, Patterson, and Vega (2011) suggested that exposing special education preservice teachers to the realities of the job may help preservice teachers understand what to expect and how to manage once they run a special education classroom on their own. Providing opportunities in which preservice teachers are engaged in the IEP, including writing and attending IEPs, has been

critical to the growth of the students in my program. As they work through the IEP process, they have gained real-world insight of the administrative duties of being a special education teacher.

Planning and managing Individualized Educational Programs. Preservice teachers need to understand that what makes up a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for a child with special needs is a decision made by the Individual Education Program team, and the district is responsible for the cost of the services. Furthermore, as preservice teachers learn the knowledge and skills needed to successfully teach special education, they must also be trained in the administrative duties of managing the required paperwork (e.g., running IEP meetings, writing compliant Individual Education Programs, progress reports, behavior plans, Medicaid) as the average amount of time a special education teacher spends on administrative paperwork per week is 5 hours (Mehrenberg, 2013). The administrative skills of special education require training in time management, organization, and communication to effectively complete the documentation and facilitation requirements of the job (Dunn & Derthick, 2008). The study participants also mentioned these areas as being essential training points. For example, in the interview, A1 stated, “Negatively, many teachers do not complete paperwork to the fullest potential. I found in one placement that I was more specific than the teacher was in completing these tasks.” Even the newest of preservice teachers, A1, was able to see that time needs to be dedicated to being efficient and thorough with the administrative duties of teaching special education.

Ongoing Coaching of Assessment Practices and Using Data

According to the study participants, an indispensable experience for special education preservice teachers is learning how to assess a child's ability in all areas, including transition, and knowing how to use the data to plan instruction. Without assessment and individually designed instruction for each child, special education services do not adhere to the mandates of IDEA (2004). Understanding how to assess and use data to make learning accessible is essential to help a child with special needs reach his or her maximum potential. This skill needs to be emphasized continuously in the coursework on campus and in the field. Campbell and Collins (2007), as a part of their study on appropriate textbooks to use to prepare special education teachers for the field, discussed the importance of guiding preservice teachers through the process of learning assessment and ensuring that they understand that the cornerstone to effective instruction is assessment, and when the two work together in tandem, improvement in student achievement is likely to occur.

Assessment and remediation. Administering assessments to reveal the needs of the child needing special education services can help to define not only their instructional level and areas of need for remediation, but can also define the need for supplementary aides and services (e.g., test read, modified test, assistive technologies; Johnson, 2015). Special education teachers must know how to access students' needs and plan curriculum and instruction so that students can access the grade-level content all while ensuring that they are in compliance with federal laws (Robert et al., 2014). On the basis of the language of IDEA, teachers, regardless of discipline, are expected to use assessment to guide effective decision making, particularly with

respect to the identification, remediation, and ongoing evaluation of students with learning difficulties (Campbell & Collins, 2007). It is critical that an appropriate measurement tool is used to assess a student's needs for instruction and behavior as applicable. If children are appropriately placed at an instructional level, they will generally cope well if the teacher assigns tasks at that level (Hargis, 1996). As special education teacher preparation programs create coursework experiences to teach the aforementioned skills, according to the perceptions of the sample in this study, it is also essential that those preparing to teach special education are able to practice their skills with experienced teachers in the field. In the study, when interviewed, B10 stated:

> I administered a reading test, and then based on the scores, I could see what the students needed to work on, and then I could give them a lesson based on that. This is important to my training so I know what to do to begin individualizing instruction.

As preservice teachers are exposed to assessment practices and use the data to plan instruction, they are more likely to understand how to plan individualized instruction.

A Solid Foundation of How to Build Relationships with Students

The data revealed that an indispensable experience that preservice special education teachers must have in coursework is learning and understanding how to build relationships with students. According to the literature, although found in the general education literature and not the special education literature, this is a critical component of working with students with special needs (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Ruppar et al., 2015).

A special education teacher must show that they are interested in the child and care for the child. According to the study, understanding how to build a relationship with each child in

the special education classroom is a skill that preservice teachers must possess before entering the field to instill motivation to learn in students. Establishing a deep and personal relationship with students with special needs is essential to the success of the special education teacher (Ruppar et al., 2015). Learning how to build relationships with students is an integral part of the educational experience because they provide further insight into cultural and social factors that influence how students with special needs learn and how educators can best reach them (Boyes, 2013). Although multiple factors contribute to the success of a healthy relationship between a student and teacher, positive relationships greatly contribute to a positive learning experience. A student may thrive or wilt under the tutelage of one teacher more than another (Ruppar et al., 2015).

Embracing inherent personality differences. A strong connection between a student and a teacher can be difficult to achieve (Boyes, 2013). Educators must understand that the teacher leads the relationship by transferring knowledge, sharing wisdom, and providing direction. In addition to teaching skills, an astute teacher will also consider the emotional and psychological needs of the student and make adjustments accordingly (Boyes, 2013). Ultimately, if a teacher realizes the inherent personality differences between students and embraces these differences in each student, an appreciation and empathy may develop and the student may want to listen to the teacher rather than to shut down and avoid the transfer of knowledge (Boyes, 2013).

In building relationships with students, teachers must (a) recognize that human motivation is internal and (b) attempt to satisfy basic needs (Hinton et al., 2011). Human beings

see the world through perceptual lenses, and they organize the input received from the external world into patterns in the brain (Wubbolding, 2002). Classroom teachers need to create an environment in which students can attain a sense of belonging, while at the same time allow students to feel that they have some control over their academic success (Hinton et al., 2011).

The teacher's ability to build relationships with students and make positive connections impacts all aspects of classroom life. Sturtevant (2014) described the importance of teachers possessing the ability to build relationships with students. However, as preservice special education teachers learn their way of building relationships with students, it is also important for them to understand not only how to build a relationship but also how to maintain the relationship in the academic and behavioral expectations of the classroom and school alike.

An Understanding of How to Work with Paraprofessionals

Both the survey and interview data showed that the veteran special education teachers in this study believe an indispensable experience for preservice teachers preparing to become special education teachers is the ability to understand how to work with paraprofessionals. However, a distinct difference between the veteran and preservice teachers existed in these responses as the preservice teachers did not reveal these areas in their data. The distinct difference in perception may be due to a lack of coursework and clinical experiences on understanding how to work with paraprofessionals in their preservice special education teacher preparation program. Therefore, this is a notable finding in that special education preparation programs may find it advantageous to specifically focus on the working relationship between

paraprofessionals and special education teachers early and often within a special education teacher preparatory program.

Creating partnerships in the classroom. Although research on training special education preservice teachers to work with paraprofessionals was not apparent within the literature, Lee and Haegele (2016) made recommendations for using paraprofessionals in the classroom for the benefit of students with special needs, which included the teacher (a) using active and reciprocal communication between the teacher and the paraprofessions; (b) sharing lesson plans to keep the paraprofessional a part of preplanning; and (c) developing a collegial, working relationship. Understanding parameters for working with paraprofessionals may provide special education preservice teachers with the tools needed to create a partnership that may be needed in the classroom.

Managing classroom staff can be a difficult skill, especially for a new teacher. However, as experiences are provided that help the preservice teacher understand how to make use of personnel to the fullest, the preservice teacher can begin to perceive that paraprofessionals can help create an educational experience for special needs students that provides optimal educational benefit. Although the preservice teachers from Groups A and B did not note this as an indispensable experience in this study, the veteran teachers emphasized the importance of understanding how to manage classroom staff. The lack of perception in this area may suggest that working with paraprofessionals may need to be stressed in multiple coursework assignments and clinical experiences as the preservice teachers prepare to manage a special education room and staff on their own.

Brock and Carter (2015) determined that using paraprofessionals in the classroom can be of utmost value not only to the special education teacher but also to the students. However, if the special education teacher does not know how to guide and support the paraprofessional, the partnership could become a lost opportunity for the paraprofessional, special education teacher, and the students. Brown and Stanton-Chapman (2014) determined that a teacher can alleviate the feeling of subservience felt among paraprofessionals by including them in academic classroom roles and offering training programs and advising. Empowering a paraprofessional may help to reduce the educational gap for students with special needs. Teaching preservice teachers to plan for and manage classroom support staff may be an important element of teacher preparation in special education as the data from this study revealed this as an essential element according to veteran special education teachers included in the sample.

Experiences of How to Work with Parents

The results of the survey and interview also identified another distinct difference in perceptions between the veteran and preservice teachers who participated in this study. The veteran special education teachers believed that an indispensable experience for preservice teachers was understanding how to work with parents. However, a distinct difference between the veteran and preservice teachers existed in these responses as the preservice teachers did not address this experience. The difference may be due to the preservice teacher's time of study spent teaching to plan for and teach students with special needs, and not on the related areas that are relevant and important to teaching, such as working with parents.

Parents as educational partners. The literature also show that special education teachers must know how to provide guidance to parents while showing empathy and care (Mueller, 2015). They must be good listeners and have enough knowledge to offer advice when needed. At the same time, the special education teacher must be in constant communication with the parent, which allows for the delivery of both good and occasionally bad news. Preservice teachers must be provided experiences that allow them to interact with families so that they can begin to perceive the importance of establishing these bonds.

Murray and colleagues (2013) researched the value of involving parents of children with disabilities in the coursework of the teacher candidates. The result was that the teacher candidates reported feeling less judgmental and more caring toward families of students with special needs, and they conveyed that their intimidation turned into confidence (Murray et al., 2013). The change was attributed to a combination of increased knowledge about the parents and their concerns for their children. As teacher preparation programs create experiences to help facilitate learning about working with parents, involving parents in the coursework may be a viable option.

Recommendations Based on the Study Findings

On the basis of the findings of this study, recommendations from the literature, and my own professional experiences, suggestions of how to improve special education teacher preparation are addressed in the following sections and include an overview of recommended (1) essential coursework experiences, (2) essential clinical experiences, and (3) teaching special

education in the rural area. Because my sample was from a rural area, recommendations specifically highlight how to impact rural special education teacher preparation.

Essential coursework experiences. As preservice special education teachers are prepared for the rigors of teaching in special education, specifically in a rural area, they must be provided with coursework experiences that give an in-depth understanding and practice of the Individual Education Program (IEP) process with a trained faculty member who understands the federal, state, and local laws (Wasburn-Moses, 2009). This will help preservice teachers not only understand how to write an IEP but also how to implement it with fidelity. The administrative duties related to the IEP process are time-consuming and have been estimated to take up as much as 17% of a special education teacher's day (Vannest et al., 2011). The rural special education teacher may be the only person responsible for timely scheduling of the Annual or Reevaluation IEP, inviting and contacting the attendees, writing goals for all subject areas and transition planning (as applicable), directing the IEP meeting, finalizing the IEP before the 365-day timeline expires, and ensuring that the parents receive a copy within the IDEA timeline. They must also keep track of and complete their special education administrative duties of progress monitoring and reporting, filing Medicaid, and coordinating services with allied service providers.

In addition to studying the process and writing IEPs, the coursework experience needs to emphasize the legality of the administrative duties of special education and help the preservice teacher understand issues of compliance with IDEA, state, and intermediate school district rules (Harry & Klinger, 2006). As faculty members from teacher preparation in special education plan

experiences to help teach these concepts and skills, they are encouraged to integrate expert special education teachers and allied service providers into their classes as guest speakers. They should also plan to integrate mentoring sessions for the students and even co-instructors for the class along with other faculty members in the campus setting to help ensure that the students have a thorough understanding of their responsibilities for completing the IEP process from beginning to end and complying with the law (Vannest et al., 2011).

According to the results of the open-ended survey and interviews, all participant groups believed that each special education preservice teacher must also possess a comprehensive understanding of how to administer assessments and use the data for planning individualized instruction. Coursework that provides experiences with delivering multiple batteries of assessments to assess academic and transition skills may provide the baseline knowledge and understanding from which the preservice teachers can grow and master the skill of assessment. When teaching special education in a rural area, the teacher may have the same students for multiple subjects and they must know how to assess the special needs child to build a comprehensive instructional plan for the child (Monk, 2007). In the coursework, expert teachers from the field can be used to help the special education preservice teacher understand how assessment is used to drive instructional practices and monitor progress throughout the entire school year (Campbell & Collins, 2007).

Teaching preservice teachers how to build relationships with students with special needs is an essential skill to master and was supported by the data in this study. Coursework experiences that help to lay the foundation of building relationships is essential. The faculty

teaching the course can use the art of storytelling (Boye, 2013) to help relay this cornerstone of success to preservice teachers. For example, I spend time in each of my courses on campus telling scenarios about the common events in my classroom. However, beginning with the first on-campus course in the sequence, I emphasize three core concepts of how to interact and build relationships with students with special needs. The core concepts are to listen to the child, show empathy as appropriate, and redirect the child to the classroom task as soon as possible. This procedure has allowed me to maintain the academic integrity of my classroom while building the needed relationships with the students so they will respect and listen to my guidance and teaching. It is particularly essential to know how to connect with the special needs child in a rural area because the child may spend nearly half of his or her day with the same special education teacher (Goldhaber et al., 2015). Without this foundational relationship, the child may disengage academically; if this disengagement occurs for multiple hours, it can significantly debilitate his or her educational experience and goals (Boye, 2013).

Because the preservice teachers in this study did not perceive the importance of understanding how to work with paraprofessional staff, while the veteran teachers did, it is important to emphasize how this skill might be taught in coursework. Because rural special education teachers can often be isolated, or even the only special education teacher on staff at a given school, it is important to understand how to manage classroom staff to their greatest potential (Brock & Carter, 2015). A well-trained paraprofessional may even become a much-needed collaborator for the rural special education teacher. Course units on classroom management can be used to explain the importance of strategically employing paraprofessionals

in the classroom to act as instructional assistance for small groups of students, behavior monitors, one-on-one tutors, and even a co-teacher if properly trained by the special education teacher. During the special education preservice teacher's coursework, well-trained paraprofessionals could be introduced on a panel of guest speakers to help stress ways to embed their assistance in the classroom.

Last, the preservice teachers in this study revealed a distinct difference in perception than did the veteran teachers regarding the importance of working with parents of children with special needs. Knowing how to communicate, collaborate, inform, discuss, and ask for input from parents of children with special needs is a critical skill for any special educator. As college faculty plan experiences to build these skills with special education teachers, they need to provide a real-world perspective that includes dealing with delightful and perhaps unruly parents (and everything in between). As recommended in the literature (Murray et al., 2013), it may be proactive to consider co-teaching one of the courses in the sequence leading to special education teacher endorsement along with a parent of a child with special needs so that an ongoing perspective can be given. In addition, the literature suggested college faculty create relationships with local families who have children with special needs and for preservice teachers to be assigned to spend time in the family's home in order to help with tutoring and other responsibilities with the special needs child. This may provide the real-world perception of the importance of working with parents of children with special needs that can help preservice special education teachers continuously work to ensure that partnerships with parents are formed (Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008).

Essential clinical experiences. Preservice special education teachers must also have high-quality clinical experiences. In this study, the themes helped to identify how the clinical experiences might be structured as well as the specific knowledge, skills, and dispositions that should be emphasized in each clinical setting.

According to the results and literature (Conderman & Katsiyannis, 2012; Wagner et al., 2012), each preservice special education teacher needs to participate in varying and multiple experiences in the clinical setting. The setting should range from the resource room to a setting in which the students have multiple disabilities. Field experiences should allow preservice special educators to apply theoretical coursework and implement best practices in authentic settings before they run a classroom independently (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003). Preservice teachers who intend to teach in the rural setting need exposure to as many low-incidence disability categories as possible during their training, given that they may be the only special education teachers to provide services in the school and they must understand how to work with a compilation of disabilities simultaneously and often single-handedly (Billingsley & Scheuermann, 2014). In addition, preservice teachers need to be given the opportunity to work with elementary, middle, and high school students, and in those categories, they should know how to provide instruction for students who may be significantly older than the grade level in which they function academically.

A common theme of the results was that all sample groups believed that preservice special education teachers also need to be provided with the opportunity to practice the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process with an expert special education teacher. Monk

(2007) said that in a rural area, the special education teacher may be the only special education instructional expert in the school and thus must plan the IEP to optimize services for the child while maximizing the services, personnel, and school schedule available in the area. Preservice special education teachers must learn to write an IEP online, from beginning to end, while also learning to stay in compliance with caseload deadlines for conducting and finalizing an IEP, progress reporting and monitoring, and filing Medicaid. They need to learn how to write appropriate and compliant goals and objectives and how to configure the best plan for supplementary aids and services to suit the special needs child. As each of the administrative skills come together, it is also important for the preservice teacher to understand and demonstrate the appropriate dispositions required to work with others during this process (Azano & Steward, 2015). Special education preservice teachers need to experience how to accurately complete the administrative duties of the job while staying within the guidelines of the law (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Understanding how to work as a team and to help others understand the student's individualized plan often takes many years and should be introduced to students in the clinical setting during their first exposure to working in the special education classroom.

Special education preservice teachers also need ongoing coaching of assessment practices and using data with the coaching of an expert special education teacher. In the clinical setting, the preservice teacher should give multiple assessments in various subject areas, including transition assessments (Ruppar et al., 2015). When teaching special education in a rural area, the teacher may be solely responsible for assessing students and tracking data on multiple students in all categories of the students' service needs (Billingsley & Scheuermann, 2014). After collecting

the initial assessment data, they should not only be taught to keep organized charts and graphs to show growth, but also understand how to use formative and summative assessments to monitor growth and plan instruction. As these cornerstones are put into place, it is also important for the preservice teachers to understand that student growth may not be as immediate as planned and that assessment should continually occur to determine an instructional plan. Quality special education clinical experiences may offer students the opportunity to practice the skills associated with delivering and interpreting assessments early and often in their teacher preparatory programs.

Special education preservice teachers must be provided experiences in the clinical setting to practice the skill of building a relationship with a child with special needs with the guidance and support of an expert special education teacher. In the rural setting, a special education teacher may spend multiple and consecutive hours with a child with special needs, and it is essential that a relationship is formed so that learning can occur (Boye, 2013). I was recently coaching a preservice teacher who was in her fourth year in the special education teacher preparation program and an outstanding candidate for certification. However, when observing her on her first day in a classroom, before even getting to know the students, she loudly and unexpectedly told them, “I am in charge, and you will listen to me.” As a result, the students would not comply with or listen to her. She became visibly frustrated, and the students lost the motivation to learn. She reported to me that she did not like high school students and would be more suited for elementary school. I quickly reminded her that her certification would be for K–12, and that it might not be possible for her to control the level she would be teaching (I always

wanted early elementary but was always in the middle or high school setting). I reminded her of each student's background. The group of five students with whom she was working all had learning disabilities in the area of math, but at the same time, two were involved in the juvenile probation system for truancy, one had just returned to school from suspension, and another was experiencing her first day in the class. Her approach to teaching demonstrated a lack of skill with beginning to build a relationship through getting to know the students, a soft and reassuring tone of voice, and a simple lesson from which she could develop skills as she built trust with the students. It is only then that the students might begin to listen, work, and even thrive as a result of the relationship with the special education preservice teacher.

In the clinical setting, preservice special education teachers must also experience how to maximize the potential of paraprofessionals in the classroom when they are available (Armstrong, 2010). In the rural area, it is possible that the special education paraprofessional may be the only source of instructional assistance for the teacher and students in the special education classroom or in the entire school. Federal law specifies that assistants who are appropriately trained and supervised "may be used to assist in the provision of special education and related services" (IDEA, 2004). If the appropriate training occurs, the paraprofessional can be used to strengthen the instructional and managerial practices of the special education teachers. As a result of their research, Brock and Carter (2015) found that a brief coaching session emphasizing modeling and performance feedback can be a powerful tool for promoting implementation fidelity. Knowing how to work with paraprofessionals may be an essential skill

that can be taught to preservice teachers in the clinical setting and may strengthen their ability to make use of and manage classroom staff.

In the clinical setting, special education preservice teachers also need to experience how to work and communicate with parents. In the rural setting, the special education teacher may be the only expert that the parent can communicate with regarding the needs of and support services for their child. In addition, it is the special education teacher's moral and legal obligation to work with parents, as IDEA (1997) mandated the inclusion of families of children with disabilities in educational programming (although IDEA provides minimal guidance about what that involvement must look like). Although special education law recognizes the importance of individualized services for children who have been identified with special needs, the same philosophy is needed to open doors for parenting partnerships between teachers and parents, which may be unique to each family (Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008). Special education preservice teachers need to understand that the individualization of the services they provide needs to extend beyond the child and to each individual family.

Teaching Special Education in the Rural Area

Teaching special education in the rural area presents numerous complications that need to be addressed in special education teacher preparation programs. To improve learning and developmental for all children, especially for those children with disabilities whose services are provided by rural local educational agencies, it is critical that teachers have access to effective preparation, ongoing support, and the resources they need to succeed. As a result of their research on rural special education teacher preparation, Allen and Jones (2015) concluded,

"Unfortunately, while there are many strong programs throughout the country, too many special education teacher preparation programs fall short, and that makes access to effective teachers for those living in rural communities even more challenging" (p. 3). Although the research on rural special education teacher preparation is sparse, Allen and Jones (2015) identified that there is a need to address and define the uniqueness of teaching special education in a rural area.

This study helped to define which indispensable experiences need to be incorporated into special education teacher preparation programs through examining perceptions of veteran teachers who are actively teaching special education in the rural areas and comparing those perceptions with preservice teachers enrolled in a special education teacher preparation in a rural area. In addition, it helped to clarify what makes teaching special education in a rural area unique, as the veteran group, Group A, and Group B provided insight on their experiences of teaching in a rural area. For example, they overwhelmingly stated that a rural special education teacher must be a "jack of all trades" because they often service children with special needs from varying disability categories and academic levels at the same time. Sometimes, as in the case of V21, the special education teacher may be assigned a full caseload of students but may be the only special education teacher in the building. This eliminates the ability to collaborate on a daily basis with other special education teachers on curriculum and instructional decisions that need to be made for each child. In terms of scheduling, being the only special education teacher may also eliminate the possibility of co-teaching with the general education teacher, as the special education teacher may be assigned to a group of high- and low-functioning students at the same time. This makes it difficult to cater to the high-functioning group in a co-taught setting, which

often complicates the teacher's ability to offer the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) for each individual student. In addition, special needs students in rural areas who require service in multiple academic areas may spend many hours a day with the same special education teacher, requiring that a sustainable relationship is formed between the child and the teacher. Furthermore, when living and teaching in a rural area, the special education teacher may be a visible community member, coach, churchgoer, or parent. They may have the opportunity to be role models to the child both in and outside the classroom, which may be formative to the child and help build relationships with the child's family, as well as create a sense of community in and outside of the classroom. However, this also reduces the anonymity that some special education teachers prefer.

For special education teachers who choose to teach in a rural area, it is important that their preparation program prepare them for the challenges that lie in rural special education service models. The subsequent sections include a discussion of how the findings of this study may help to improve the preparation of preservice teachers planning to teach special education in the rural setting. Furthermore, the sections highlight how the adult learning theory, andragogy, can help college faculty plan special education teacher preparation programming that can assist undergraduates shift from pedagogical to andragogical learning as they prepare to teach special education in a rural area.

Implications for Educational Leaders

As special education teacher preparation faculty plan program experiences for preservice teachers, it is important to bear in mind the unique challenges of teaching special education in a

rural area. In such settings, an educator may be the only special education teacher in the building, or even district, and may need to understand how to independently deliver services. This study revealed the perceptions of veteran teachers working in a rural area and compared them to perceptions of preservice teachers attending a special education preparation program in the same rural area. Their perspective provides a starting place from which to determine the indispensable experiences (e.g., varying clinical settings, Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), assessments, building relationships) that need to be emphasized in special education teacher preparation programs. The study also identified distinctions in perceptions that revealed areas that need to be addressed in special education teacher preparation with perhaps greater intensity (working with parents and paraprofessionals). As experiences are developed to teach these skills, a consideration of the adult learning theory of andragogy may be beneficial to help promote self-directed learning. Because of the variations of teaching special education, it is essential that the preservice teachers learn to be self-directed as they will continually seek answers about how to individualize services for each student they teach. Self-directed, motivated learners are needed in the field to help improve rural special education as a whole.

Andragogy and improving preservice education teacher preparation. In researching how to best prepare special education preservice teachers for the rural classroom, six noteworthy themes or experiences emerged from the study results. The research literature suggests that special education teacher preparation programs must encompass more than pedagogically oriented curriculum plans that are designed for children and primarily focus on content (Knowles, 1984). For example, providing the opportunity to learn about working with parents of

students with special needs might involve bringing parents to an on campus class to facilitate a discussion and then asking the special education preservice teacher to follow up with a phone call home to the same parent to mimic the realities of working with parents of students with special needs. Activities such as this may help to facilitate self-directed learning as compared to teacher-directed learning. Adult learning, as compared with pedagogical learning, is a process design that allows the student to gain skills and experiences that help the student to apply this design repeatedly as new knowledge is sought out, contributing to lifelong and self-directed learning (Knowles, 1984). Knowles (1980) stressed that experience and maturity among adult learners can help guide instructors on how much self-directed learning they encourage in their classes. Although teacher-directed, pedagogical learning may be the most comfortable and familiar method of instructional delivery, it is important to consider how a college faculty can help the learner grow into an andragogic, self-directed learner.

Incorporating the principles of andragogy into special education teacher preparation. The results of this study revealed that distinctions existed between what the veteran special education teachers and both Group A and Group B preservice teachers perceived to be essential experiences in special education teacher preparation. Whereas the veteran teachers emphasized the importance of gaining an understanding of how to work with paraprofessionals and gaining experience with working with parents, the preservice teachers did not mention these skills. This gap in perception could be a result of missing content in the special education teacher preparation coursework at the rural college, or simply because it did not register as an important element to those training to be special education teachers.

On the basis of the results from this study, the need to incorporate knowledge of paraprofessionals and working with families into special education preparatory programs with greater intention is clear. Using the principles of andragogy may create a framework for delivering this instruction. The following section provides several examples of how to infuse the principles of andragogy in relation to working with paraprofessionals (See Tables 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 for further recommendations of how to incorporate principles of andragogy into special education teacher preparation). I have bolded the principles of andragogy to aid the reader in distinguishing applications of the andragogic principles.

An understanding of how to work with paraprofessionals. Clinical experiences and coursework experiences that adhere to principles of andragogy and teach how to work with paraprofessionals need to be incorporated in the special education teacher preparation program (see Table 5). As the learner moves from being a **dependent learner to an independent learner**, the preservice teacher can learn the critical importance of making use of support staff by creating lessons and conducting discussions on how to manage instruction when other adults are available to help. Using paraprofessionals in the special education classroom can vary from class to class; however, if the general paradigm includes the special education teacher delegating task, and even team teaching as appropriate with the paraprofessional, a multitude of positive educational experiences may result.

According to the data from this study, the special education preservice teachers did not reveal an understanding of the potential instructional benefits that a paraprofessional may be able to offer. As preservice special education teachers **draw upon their own experience or the**

experience of others, they may benefit from listening to a panel of paraprofessionals discuss their experiences in the field. Teaching preservice teachers the skill of how to manage the classroom staff should be part of their training and they should experience working with paraprofessionals. So that they can **experience a gap in their learning** which may facilitate becoming a self-directed learner, they need to be given the opportunity in coursework and in the clinical setting to learn to manage paraprofessionals, plan for their integrations into the special education classroom, and share and help them understand the lesson plan (Lee & Haegele, 2016) from which the student will be instructed. An example of this includes providing a course assignment that requires a video demonstration of the plan they facilitated with a paraprofessional in the field. As preservice teachers are put into situations in which they have to seek collaboration, they may learn to collaborate with support staff for the benefit of student learning. Studies have also shown that paraprofessionals are much less effective working with those with disabilities when they have not received training from teachers, however, when properly trained paraprofessionals serve as essential team members in the classroom, they often form close relationships that benefit students (Armstrong, 2010; Blalock, 1991). Teaching special education preservice teachers how to train and provide direction to the paraprofessional should be encouraged.

An **organized curriculum** should address how to use the assistance of paraprofessionals and how to navigate the power dynamic that may exist between the paraprofessional and the special education teacher in the classroom. V20 explained the problems that occur when this skill is overlooked. She stated:

> My first teaching position was working in a classroom at a center-based program for emotionally challenged kids. It was so far removed from what I had learned in college. For one thing, I was in charge of five paraprofessionals. There had been no coursework about that.

As special education teacher programs focus on andragogic principles, they may promote self-directed learning and better prepare preservice teachers to collaborate in the field.

Change in the Researcher's Perception

As a veteran special education teacher, I had certain ideas about what this study would reveal. As aforementioned, I completed the open-ended survey prior to distributing the survey to the sample. I analyzed my own survey responses in conjunction with my analysis of the sample and found that my responses on the open-ended survey supported all of the six themes revealed in this study. However, given that I am an advocate of assistive technology, in my survey responses I discussed learning about assistive technology and thought other members of the sample would speak to assistive technology as being an essential element of special education teacher preparation as well. For example, as I was the first to respond to the veteran teacher and within my answers I wrote, "Teach the students to use technology, including text to speech programs to improve access to learning. Make digital recordings of tests and reading chapters. Teach the pre-service teachers to use technology starting day one." However, the findings of this study did not mimic my perception of the importance of studying about and using assistive technology within the special education classroom. In addition, I discussed how it is important for the faculty of a special education teacher preparation program to be present in the field. In my

survey I wrote, “I wish I had been able to visit many different special education classrooms along with my professors so that they could point out the important things I needed to know.” Although the literature supports the assumption of faculty involvement in the field (Billingsley, & Scheuermann, 2014; Phillion, Chamness Miller, & Lehman, 2005), it was not found to be a notable perception within the sample in this study. Perhaps purposeful follow up interviews of the sample to ask specified questions in these areas may help to provide recommendations regarding the importance of the presence of the faculty in the clinical setting. In the future I would like to conduct further research around these two topics.

Limitations

This study includes several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, this study only included rural special education teachers from a two-county area and special education preservice teachers studying in the same rural area. All 30 veteran teacher participants came from different school districts in a rural mid-western state, and although the number of participants falls within the appropriate range for such a descriptive qualitative study, in accord with Leedy and Ormrod (2010), the results of this study may have limited generalization beyond this particular geographic context. I addressed this limitation among the veteran teachers as the years of experience ranged from eight to 40 years. In addition, because sample groups in qualitative studies are usually purposeful (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006), working in the same rural area as each of the participants allows for better question design and impartation of more information with increased reliability than through random sampling.

Second, although I played a role in this study, my involvement also constitutes a

limitation because my role is not generalizable to other studies. It was impossible to extrapolate my experiences and biases from the data collection and data analysis and interpretation, hence I consider my presence to be both a strength and a potential limitation.

Third, because I was the professor of the preservice teachers in the study, social desirability may have played a role in the results as they may have tried to please their professor. Finally, because of my interest in the topic and my drive to improve special education teacher preparation in special education in a rural area, personal bias may advertently interfere with the validity of the data.

Future Research

This study revealed six themes concerning indispensable experiences for preparing special education teachers. It would be beneficial to conduct a similar study in an urban setting and compare the results to the themes revealed in this study, which was conducted in a rural setting. It is important to understand whether there are distinct demands and challenges involved in teaching in a rural area as opposed to an urban area, and if so, how the issues can be addressed in teacher preparation in special education. This is especially relevant as we do not always know the geographical area a specific student will end up working as a special education teacher. In addition, I recommend conducting a study to determine the effect of a preservice teacher's own K–12 experience (rural or urban) on their choice of and success in teaching in a rural or urban area to determine if the impact of their rearing has bearing on where they choose to teach. Lastly, as the special education preservice teachers from this study enter the field and become employed as certified special education teachers, I plan to conduct follow-up surveys and interviews to

probe what experiences were essential to (or should have been incorporated in) their training and what experiences have contributed to their performance as special educators.

Summary of the Overall Study

Through a qualitative descriptive study, I asked the research question, "What do veteran and preservice special education teachers believe are indispensable experiences when a student is learning to become a special education teacher?" to elicit data from both veteran (8 years or more of experience) and preservice special education teachers who work and study in a two-county rural area. My own perceptions and experiences, as a rural veteran special and general educator for 24 years and a college faculty member in charge of teacher preparation in special education, played a role in the study. Insight was gained through the 58 survey responses, and six interviews. The information gathered can serve to inform special education teacher preparation faculty in how to strengthen the programming designed to train rural special education teachers. Furthermore, as the commonalties among and distinct differences between perceptions of preservice teachers and veteran teachers were identified, this insight provided an opportunity to examine how the principles of the adult learning theory andragogy (Knowles, 1984) can be applied in this context.

The results reveal that preservice teachers preparing to teach special education in a rural area should (a) have varying and multiple ongoing experience in the clinical setting, (b) provide an in-depth understanding of the Individual Education Program process, (c) teach how to administer assessments and how to use the data, and (d) emphasize the importance of building relationships. In addition, veteran teachers only identified two additional experiences, including

(a) experiences in working with parents and (b) an understanding of how to work with paraprofessionals. I asserted that essential components of special education teacher preparation can use andragogical principles to be more effective. As special education teacher preparation programs improve, so might the quality of services that will help students with special needs succeed.

Conclusions

Preparing special education preservice educators to conceptually understand and then implement practices to address numerous and complex interactions between pedagogy and content is a difficult task. However, a well-designed curriculum guided by andragogical principles may inform the creation of a developmentally appropriate special education teacher preparation program. As preservice special education teachers acquire the foundation of knowledge from which to grow and become lifelong learners, they may in return affect the lives of the students with special needs throughout rural America. Therefore, it is important for special education teacher preparation programs to carefully consider effective ways to develop and deliver content and practices to meet the learning needs of preservice educators, and it is equally important to take into account the perceptions of both inservice and preservice teachers about the essential skills and content that must be included within the program.

Through this study, common perceptions of the essential elements were identified. The results of this study can serve to pinpoint ways in which educators and administrators can best prepare special education preservice teachers for the field. Optimizing the experience on campus and in the clinical setting, integrating experiences to create lifelong learners, and tailoring

programs to prepare preservice teachers to teach special education is a strong starting point for teachers who will eventually contend with the challenges of special education in any environment, including the rural environment.

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Appendix A

Link to Pilot Survey, see last Question of the Survey

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1fTek-DlzQW2UcpwJ4UXgoIVLEbi79fdzwvW1yzr3EPk/viewform

Appendix B

Veteran Special Education Survey Questions:

1. What is your special education teaching situation as of today (e.g., number of years, certification areas, type of classroom, majors/minors, graduate study etc.)

2. Why did you want to become a special education teacher?

3. When you were studying to become a special education teacher, what coursework/on-campus experiences did you find most beneficial to your preparation?

4. When you were studying to become a special education teacher, what coursework/on-campus experiences do you wish you had to prepare you for the field?

5. During your clinical/field experiences in preparing to become a special education teacher, what experiences were the most beneficial to your learning?

6. What special education clinical/field experiences do you wish you had during your preparation while you were studying to become a special education teacher?

7. Tell about a time or an experience that happened after you started teaching professionally that demonstrated a distinct difference between what you learned in your program and the reality in the field.

8. Write about a time or an experience that you had after you got into the classroom that demonstrated for you that you were prepared, and knew you could use something you'd learned in coursework that applied to the situation.

9. From your perspective, what can special education teachers do to significantly impact special education students' learning? How can that be taught to pre-service special education teachers?

10. Are there any other comments or stories you would like to contribute to the topic of this research?

Appendix C

Pre-service Special Education Survey Questions:

1. What is your special education teaching situation as of today (e.g., number of months or years studying in special education)

2. Why do you want to become a special education teacher?

3. What coursework/on-campus experiences have you found most beneficial to your preparation?

4. What coursework/on-campus experiences do you wish to have to prepare you for the field?

5. During your clinical/field experiences in preparing to become a special education teacher, what experiences do you feel are most beneficial to your learning?

6. What special education clinical/field experiences do you wish to have during your preparation while you are studying to become a special education teacher?

7. Do you think there any significant differences between what you are learning in your special education teacher preparation program and the realities of the field?

8. Write about a time or an experience that you had after you got into the classroom for field placement that demonstrated for you that you were prepared, and knew you could use something you'd learned in course work that applied to the situation.

9. From your perspective, what can special education teachers do to significantly impact special education students' learning? How can that be taught to pre-service special education teachers?

10. Are there any other comments or stories you would like to contribute to the topic of this research?

Appendix D

Informed Consent Pre-service Teachers: Open-Ended Survey

You are being asked to participate in a research study that is being conducted by Peggy A. Yates, Doctoral Candidate at the University of Michigan–Flint.

The purpose of this study is to provide teacher preparation institutions with information that will help them to improve their teacher preparation programs in special education. The research was designed to investigate the perceptions of pre-service teachers regarding teacher preparation of special education teachers and the realities of the field.

You are being asked to complete an open-ended survey because you are a pre-service teacher with one month to four years of teacher preparation in special education coursework and clinical experience complete. The survey will take approximately 20–25 minutes to complete.

There are no known risks for participation in this study and your participation is voluntary. There is no identifying information being collected through the questionnaire or survey. All results from the study will be reported in aggregate with no individual information shared. You must be 18 years of age to participate.

Your participation is sincerely appreciated.

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

What the study is about: The purpose of this study is to determine if gaps exist in the perception of pre-service special education teachers regarding teaching special education in the rural setting and what veteran special education teachers believe to be true about teaching in rural special education classrooms.

Veteran special education teachers are also participating in the study.

If you agree to be in this study, I am asking you to complete a survey that will ask you questions about your perceptions of working with students with special needs, the essential understanding of curriculum, instruction, and management with regards to working with students with special needs, and what experiences you perceive will help prepare a teacher for the rural special education classroom.

Risks and benefits: I do not anticipate any risks to you participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. The compensation for participating in the study will be a $15 Meijer gift card upon full completion of the survey.

Your answers will be confidential. The records of this study will be kept private. In any report that is made public, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researcher will have access to the records. I will destroy the documents acquired from this investigation within four years of collection. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide not to take part, it will not affect your current or future relationship with the researcher or your grade in any course at Alma College. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time.

If you have questions: The researcher conducting this study is Peggy Yates, Alma College Education Faculty member and Doctoral Candidate at the University of Michigan–Flint. Please ask any questions you have. If you have questions later, you may contact Peggy Yates at yatespa@alma.edu or by calling 989.466.6056. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Alma College.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature _____

Date_____

Your Name (printed) _____

Appendix E

Informed Consent Veteran Teachers: Open-Ended Survey

You are being asked to participate in a research study that is being conducted by Peggy A. Yates, Doctoral Candidate at the University of Michigan–Flint.

The purpose of this study is to provide teacher preparation institutions with information that will help them to improve their preparation programs in special education as they prepare students for teaching in the rural setting. The research was designed to investigate the perceptions of rural, veteran special education teachers regarding preparation of special education teachers and the realities of the field.

You are being asked to complete an open-ended survey because you are a rural, veteran special education teacher with more than eight years of experience in the field. The survey will take approximately 20–30 minutes to complete.

There are no known risks for participation in this study and your participation is voluntary. There is no identifying information being collected through the interview All results from the study will be reported in aggregate with no individual information shared. You must be 18 years of age to participate.

Your participation is sincerely appreciated.

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

What the study is about: The purpose of this study is to determine if gaps exist in the perception of pre-service special education teachers regarding teaching special education in the rural setting and what veteran special education teachers believe to be true about teaching in rural special education classrooms. Pre-service special education teachers are also participating in the study.

If you agree to be in this study, I will electronically send you a link to the survey. The survey will ask you questions about your perceptions of working with students with special needs, the essential understanding of curriculum, instruction, and management with regards to working with students with special needs, and what experiences you perceive have helped prepare you for the rural special education classroom.

Risks and benefits: I do not anticipate any risks to you participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. The compensation for participating in the study will be a $15 Meijer gift card upon full completion and submission of the survey.

Your answers will be confidential. The records of this study will be kept private. In any report that is made public, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researcher will have access to the records. I will destroy the documents acquired from this investigation within four years of collection. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide not to take part, it will not affect your current or future relationship with the researcher. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time.

If you have questions: The researcher conducting this study is Peggy Yates, Alma College Education Faculty member and Doctoral Candidate at the University of Michigan–Flint. Please ask any questions you have. If you have questions later, you may contact Peggy Yates at yatespa@alma.edu or by calling 989.466.6056. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Michigan–Flint.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information and have received answers to any questions I

asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature _____

Date_____

Your Name (printed) _____

Appendix F

Informed Consent Pre-service Teachers: Interview

You are being asked to participate in a research study that is being conducted by Peggy A. Yates, Doctoral Candidate at the University of Michigan–Flint.

The purpose of this study is to provide teacher preparation institutions with information that will help them to improve their teacher preparation programs in special education as they prepare teachers for teaching. The research was designed to investigate the perceptions of veteran special education teachers regarding teacher preparation of special education teachers and the realities of the field.

You are being asked to complete an interview because you are a pre-service special education teacher with one month to four years of special education coursework complete. The interview will take approximately 30–40 minutes to complete.

There are no known risks for participation in this study and your participation is voluntary. There is no identifying information being collected through the interview. All results from the study will be reported in aggregate with no individual information shared. You must be 18 years of age to participate.

Your participation is sincerely appreciated.

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

What the study is about: The purpose of this study is to determine if gaps exist in the perception of pre-service special education teachers regarding teaching special education and what pre-service special education teachers believe to be true about teaching in special education classrooms. Veteran special education teachers are also participating in the study.

If you agree to be in this study, I will conduct an interview with you that will ask you questions about your perceptions of working with students with special needs, the essential understanding of curriculum, instruction, and management with regards to working with students with special needs, and what experiences you perceive have helped prepare you for the special education classroom.

Risks and benefits: I do not anticipate any risks to you participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. The compensation for participating in the study will be a $15 Visa gift card upon full completion of the interview.

Your answers will be confidential. The records of this study will be kept private. In any report that is made public, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researcher will have access to the records. I will destroy the documents acquired from this investigation within four years of collection. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide not to take part, it will not affect your current or future relationship with the researcher. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time.

If you have questions: The researcher conducting this study is Peggy Yates, Alma College Education Faculty member and Doctoral Candidate at the University of Michigan–Flint. Please ask any questions you have. If you have questions later, you may contact Peggy Yates at yatespa@alma.edu or by calling 989.466.6056. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Michigan–Flint.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature _____

Date_____

Your Name (printed) _____

Appendix G

Informed Consent Veteran Teachers: Interview

You are being asked to participate in a research study that is being conducted by Peggy A. Yates, Doctoral Candidate at the University of Michigan–Flint.

The purpose of this study is to provide teacher preparation institutions with information that will help them to improve their teacher preparation programs in special education as they prepare teachers for teaching in the setting. The research was designed to investigate the perceptions of veteran special education teachers regarding teacher preparation of special education teachers and the realities of the field.

You are being asked to complete an interview because you are a veteran special education teacher with more than eight years of experience in the field. The interview will take approximately 30–40 minutes to complete.

There are no known risks for participation in this study and your participation is voluntary. There is no identifying information being collected through the interview. All results from the study will be reported in aggregate with no individual information shared. You must be 18 years of age to participate.

Your participation is sincerely appreciated.

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

What the study is about: The purpose of this study is to determine if gaps exist in the perception of pre-service special education teacher regarding teaching special education and what veteran special education teachers believe to be true about teaching in special education classrooms. Pre-service special education

teachers are also participating in the study.

If you agree to be in this study, I will conduct an interview with you that will ask you questions about your perceptions of working with students with special needs, the essential understanding of curriculum, instruction, and management with regards to working with students with special needs, and what experiences you perceive have helped you be prepared for the special education classroom.

Risks and benefits: I do not anticipate any risks to you participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. The compensation for participating in the study will be a $15 Meijer gift card upon full completion of the interview.

Your answers will be confidential. The records of this study will be kept private. In any report that is made public, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researcher will have access to the records. I will destroy the documents acquired from this investigation within four years of collection. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide not to take part, it will not affect your current or future relationship with the researcher. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time.

If you have questions: The researcher conducting this study is Peggy Yates, Alma College Education Faculty member and Doctoral Candidate at the University of Michigan-Flint. Please ask any questions you have. If you have questions later, you may contact Peggy Yates at yatespa@alma.edu or by calling 989.466.6056. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Michigan–Flint.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information and have received answers to any questions I

asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature _____

Date_____

Your Name (printed) _____

Appendix H

PRE-SERVICE SPECIAL EDUCATION INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you for participating in this interview. The purpose of my study is to explore the perceptions of pre-service special education teachers and veteran special education teachers with the intention of helping to improve the preparation of pre-service teachers who are planning to teach in special education classrooms. This interview should take no longer than 30–40 minutes. If I ask you a question that you would rather not answer, please let me know. Also, please let me know if, at any point during this interview, you need a break or wish to stop the interview. I will record this interview for transcription purposes. I will not share the recording with anyone. I will conceal your identity in my report by assigning you a pseudonym (fake name). In addition, I will not reveal any other identifying information about you (e.g., name of school). If you agree to be audio recorded, I will now begin audio recording.

1. In this special education preparation program, what coursework/on-campus experiences have you found most beneficial to your preparation?

Prompt One: You mentioned [specific course, experience, assignment, etc.]. Tell me what about it is most beneficial.

Prompt Two: Give me an example of a time when you had an opportunity to use what you learned in [specific course, assignment, etc.].

2. In this special education preparation program, what clinical experience do you wish to have to prepare you for the field?

Prompt One: You mentioned you would like [a clinical experience on x, this specific experience, etc.] Please discuss how this clinical experience would be essential for you as a future special education teacher.

Prompt Two: Share with me an example of a time when you would have been able to use that experience while completing your clinical experience in the special education program.

3. As you think about your special education teacher preparation program, in what ways do you feel you are being well prepared; and in what ways do you think there are significant differences between what you are learning in your preparation program and the realities of the field?

Prompt: You mentioned a significant difference was [the specific difference, etc.] Please discuss how this difference might be changed in your courses or clinical experience as you study to become a special education teacher.

4.) Tell about a time or an experience that you had after you got into the classroom for field placement that demonstrated for you that you were prepared, and knew you could use something you learned about in course work that applied to the situation.

Prompt: You mentioned [this specific situation, etc.] Please discuss how you were able to utilize the [information, skill, etc…] during your clinical experience in a special education classroom.

5. Do you foresee there might be unique challenges to teaching special education in a rural area as opposed to in a more urban environment? if so, what are they?

Appendix I

VETERAN SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you for participating in this interview. The purpose of my study is to explore the perceptions of veteran special education teachers and pre-service special education teachers with the intention of helping to improve the preparation of pre-service teachers who are planning to teach in special education classrooms. This interview should take no longer than 30–40 minutes. If I ask you a question that you would rather not answer, please let me know. Also, please let me know if, at any point during this interview, you need a break or wish to stop the interview. I will record this interview for transcription purposes. I will not share the recording with anyone. I will conceal your identity in my report by assigning you a pseudonym (fake name). In addition, I will not reveal any other identifying information about you (e.g., name of school). If you agree to be audio recorded, I will now begin audio recording.

1. When you think back on studying to become a special education teacher, what coursework/on-campus experiences have you found most beneficial to your preparation?

Prompt One: You mentioned [specific course, experience, assignment, etc.]. Tell me what about it was most effective or beneficial.

Prompt Two: Tell me about an example of a time when you had an opportunity to use what you learned in [specific course, assignment, etc.]

2. When you think back on studying to become a special education teacher, what clinical experiences do you wish you had had to prepare you for the field?

Prompt One: You mentioned you would have liked [a clinical experience on x, this specific experience, etc.] Please discuss what you feel would have been most essential/beneficial about this [experience] when teaching special education.

Prompt Two: Share with me an example of a time when you would have been able to use that experience while teaching special education.

3. As you think back on your special education teacher preparation program, in what ways were you well prepared for work in the field, and in what ways were there significant differences between what you learned in your preparation program and the realities of the field?

Prompt: You mentioned a significant difference was [the specific difference, etc.] Please discuss what was missing for you and how this difference might have been addressed in your learning to become a special education teacher.

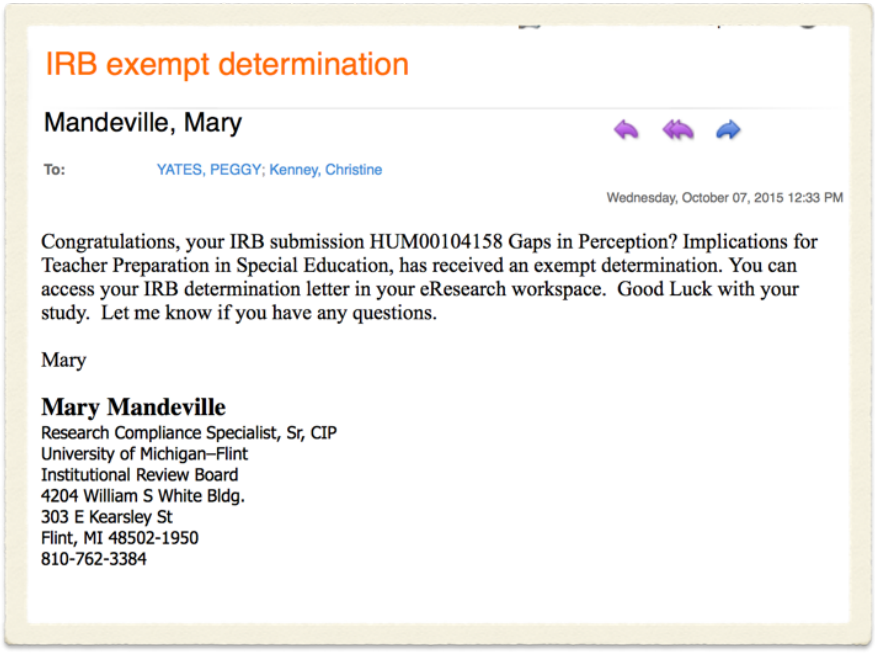
4.) Tell about a time or an experience that you had after you got into the classroom that demonstrated for you that you were prepared, and knew you could use something you'd learned in course work that applied to the situation.

Prompt: You mentioned [this specific situation, etc.] Please discuss how you were able to utilize the [information, skill, etc…] when teaching special education.

5. Would you say there are unique challenges to teaching special education in a rural area as opposed to teaching special education in a more urban environment; and if so, what are they?

Appendix J

University of Michigan–Flint Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval



IRB exempt determination

Mandeville, Mary

To: YATES, PEGGY; Kenney, Christine

Wednesday, October 07, 2015 12:33 PM

Congratulations, your IRB submission HUM00104158 Gaps in Perception? Implications for Teacher Preparation in Special Education, has received an exempt determination. You can access your IRB determination letter in your eResearch workspace. Good Luck with your study. Let me know if you have any questions.

Mary

Mary Mandeville
Research Compliance Specialist, Sr, CIP
University of Michigan–Flint
Institutional Review Board
4204 William S White Bldg.
303 E Kearsley St
Flint, MI 48502-1950
810-762-3384

Appendix K

Alma College IRB Approval

IRB Proposal

Jodie L. Reeves
To: Peggy A Yates;

Reply

Wed 1/13/2016 9:33 AM

January 13, 2016

Peggy Yates
Education Department
Alma College

Dear Peggy:

The Human Research Subjects Committee has reviewed your application for "Gaps in Perception? Implications for Teacher Preparation in Special Education" (15-16/#368) and approved it.

Congratulations and good luck with your project.

Sincerely,

Marc Setterlund
Human Research Subjects Committee Chair

Appendix L

Common Theme: Varying and multiple ongoing experiences in the clinical setting

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Common Theme: Varying and multiple ongoing experiences in the clinical setting</th></tr>
<tr><td>Veteran Special Education Teacher</td><td>Researcher</td></tr>
<tr><td>V5: I enjoyed the requirements of having to observe at different grade-levels and job-shadow teachers in various schools. During my field experiences I visited the MOCI program, SEI program, resource room setting, and an inclusion setting. I also visited students at the elementary level and at the high-school level.

V13: The experiences that were most beneficial were the ones that required me to be out in the field. Throughout my time in college, I had experience working in at least eight different classrooms.

V27: The coursework/experiences that helped fine tune my focus were the contact hours with students in the classroom.</td><td rowspan="4">I wish I had been able to visit many different special education classrooms to make a decision on how I should run my own classroom. I wish I had a chance to work in a variety of classrooms across the categories as I work with many students who do not strictly fall in the learning disabilities category</td></tr>
<tr><td>Group A (80 hours)</td></tr>
<tr><td>A7: The classroom work and learning are super beneficial, but until I actually got out into classrooms and worked with kids and teachers, I didn't really know what teaching was all about. I have had the opportunity to sit in on IEP meetings for real students, help write parts of real IEPs, and create one on one lessons to help reteach concepts to students that they didn't fully understand from the whole class lesson. Nothing beats actually doing something in a real live classroom that you've talked about in class and getting the opportunity to see those ideas and concepts actually at work.

A3: The placements along with the classes have been super beneficial and opened my eyes as to what a job in this field would look like.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Group B (30-79 hours)</td></tr>
</table>

B6: I would not know over half of what I do without field placement and physically interacting with students. My field placement has offered irreplaceable experiences that I would not have otherwise. I have sat in on IEP meetings, written mock IEPs, given assessments and learned how to come up with ways to get a student to be productive or new ways to help students through their coursework. No professor standing in front of a classroom could possibly pass on these experiences. B8: I believe the 30+ hours that I have put into placement this semester has been the most beneficial for me. Getting hands on experience with students, and having you there to help me through it has really helped me see what it's going to be like when I have my own classroom. Another beneficial part was getting to sit in on an IEP. This helped me see what happens behind the scenes. I got to see the steps of what you talked about and listen to how you and the parent interacted.	
Interview V4: Clinical experiences, probably just to get in more of it for longer duration. Those observations, yeah, it helped me be able to see those. See what people do, but I couldn't get my hands on, I needed a little bit more clinical hands on, let me fail. Let me drown for a little bit, then I can learn from that. A8 The most beneficial thing that I think that we have done on campus would be the field placements that we are put into along with the classes that go with them, so that as you're going through your field placement you're not only getting feedback from your field instructor, but you're also learning new things and getting advice from your professor on campus. A10 I want to be involved with all different age groups. Especially elementary ed. It would be cool to shadow a school psychologist, and a general ed teacher that had to integrate a special ed student into their classroom. Basically, everyone that's involved. I think it would be cool to see it from each person's perspective.	

Appendix M

Common Theme: Provide an in-depth understanding of the IEP process

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Common Theme: Provide an in-depth understanding of the IEP process.</th></tr>
<tr><td>Veteran Special Education Teacher</td><td rowspan="4">Researcher

I never learned how to run an IEP. I never sat in on an IEP. Today, when I run IEPs I wish I had learned how to navigate MDE's website to determine what changes are occurring in the IEP process rather than waiting for someone to tell me what to do.</td></tr>
<tr><td>V19: “My biggest disappointment is we make plans for students and we do not follow through with fidelity. In fact, I am sure some of the key players mentally make the choice not to follow the plan before they even leave the meeting room. IEPs are a joke. They are just a formality. Teachers entering the field need to understand that they must advocate for follow through and understand the laws that protect our kids.”

V21: Understanding the development of IEPs and writing obtainable goals and objectives is so important. In my undergraduate program we learned a lot about reading and mathematics instruction but we were never taught how to use the assessments from the classroom to help drive and prepare workable IEPs.

V16: I wish I had more experience working with the IEP program that the schools in the area were using such as EasyIEP or other programs. I wish I had experience learning how to schedule meetings and run meetings

V15: I would also have liked to have written and run an IEP (or mock IEP) so that I went through the entire process.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Group A (80 hours)</td></tr>
<tr><td>A1: Negatively, many teachers do not complete paperwork to the fullest potential. I found in one placement that I was more specific than the teacher was in completing these tasks. It is important that we know how to do an IEP.

A9: Whenever we talked about the IEP and the process and the team, I didn't realize how much tension could be between the team and how many different ideas people can have in order to try and "fix" the kid with a need. Having people skills along with the knowledge is important in getting things accomplished in the IEP meetings with the team and the parents.</td></tr>
</table>

Group B (30-79 hours)	
B5: What I am most looking forward to learning is how to make an IEP for a student done the right way and efficiently. I have had many teachers in high school tell me that there is way too much paper work in special education and that I will hate it. But I am choosing to learn the right way and to learn to do it in a way that is efficient and done correctly B4: The coursework/on-campus experiences I wish I had to prepare for the field would be more time in the IEP situations and how exactly they test before the IEP meetings.	
Interview V21: I just wish we had more coursework in how to develop good IEP goals and objectives of how you get there. A2: About IEPs and first learning to create IEPs and everything, I think was very beneficial because that's something that's obviously going to be very heavily in my career, but it's not something I can learn while doing it. That was the most beneficial thing, I think over all four years. That culminated special ed, learning how to create an IEP. B6: I sat in on two IEPs. One of them was super easy, the mom was super prepared, it was super quick. The other one, the student needed a lot more accommodations, and there was a lot more that was necessary. I kind of got to see both ends of the spectrum. One was very clear cut…everyone comes in prepared, everyone knows what they're doing, there's not a lot of discussion. Then the very not so clear… we could try this, maybe this works, maybe that works. As I student, it is important to me to have the knowledge of how IEPs work.	

Appendix N

Common Theme: Teach how to administer assessments and how to use the data

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Common Theme 3: Teach how to administer assessments and how to use the data</th></tr>
<tr><td>Veteran Special Education Teacher</td><td>Researcher</td></tr>
<tr><td>V21: Students must learn how to assess students and put them into appropriate learning levels. We spent a semester on learning assessments and how to put students in grade levels. I felt comfortable doing this. We learned a lot about different types of assessments including the Woodcock Johnson and the Brigance. We also learned about Slossan's Oral Reading Test and several math assessments. I was able to use this information to help support instruction as well.

V4: Assessment! I was very interested in the data collection process while in classes and absorbed so much. I got to the classroom and I felt confident in reading the protocols and implementing various assessments. This was essential to my training.</td><td rowspan="6">I wish I had direct instruction of how to use the assessments and interpret the data to create an IEP. I learned this on my own and by trial and error.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Group A (80 hours)</td></tr>
<tr><td>A11: The experiences that have been the most beneficial to me have been the experiences in which I was actually able to work with a student. For instance, Mrs. Yates not only showed us how to give assessments she allowed us to give the ESTR J Revised allowing for a more memorable experience.

A5: I was able to give the assessments and provide one on one supports for children which helped them meet their goals and supports their needs. This was important to my growth.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Group B (30-79 hours)</td></tr>
<tr><td>B10: In class we learned about different assessments that are given to test students' understanding of subjects like math or reading, and we learned how these assessments' results are used in IEPs. It was cool to be able to actually</td></tr>
</table>

administer the tests to students and also to sit in on an IEP and notice the application of results of those tests. B6: Becoming familiar with the different assessments in class and then giving them during placement made me feel prepared. I knew the flow of the test, the instructions, and relatively how much time to give students to complete the questions.	
Interview Veteran V21: We use the BRIGANCE here, but we've used others, such as the Woodcock-Johnson is out there. easyCBM is another one, DIBELS. Some are better than others, but they all give you the same information, and it leads you to where you need to further assess. There's not one assessment that you should be using. There's multiple tools. Using basic flashcards is an assessment as long as you're keeping the running log of your data. You always start because there isn't an area where you want to skip because it's all going to give you the bits and pieces of information because a Special Ed child, there isn't going to be just one specific area where they're struggling. There's usually a multiple, with gaps in between. A2: The End of Year EOY, Middle of Year MOY, Beginning of Year BOY assessment assignment was very beneficial because I learned how to truly plan out everything which will be incredibly important skill for me when teaching special education. B10: When we administered the Brigance test, we learned how to do that in class, and what that would mean. In terms of what those scores meant. I administered a reading test, and then based on the scores, I could see what the students needed to work on, and then I could give them a lesson based on that. This is important to my training so I know what to do to begin individualizing instruction	

Appendix O

Common Theme: Emphasize the importance of building relationships

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Common Theme 4: Emphasize the importance of building relationships</th></tr>
<tr><td>Veteran Special Education Teacher</td><td rowspan="4">The Researcher

Each student is a puzzle that needs individualized problem solving. I wish my professors would have explained to me to choose my battles, and to let some things go depending on the need of the child…that will help with building a relationship in my opinion and experience.”</td></tr>
<tr><td>V17: I think first and foremost if a special education teacher wants to impact a student's learning he/she must first develop a rapport with the student. The student must come to trust the special education teacher. When the student knows that the teacher is on their side and can trust them, then the teacher can make an impact on the student. Developing a positive relationship with the student is critical. I'm not sure how you teach that to pre-service special education teachers. For some teachers I think it comes naturally. Unfortunately, we have all seen teachers who have never developed it or embraced it. It usually is not a good situation. Fortunately, it is a skill that can be developed over time I believe.

V18: By understanding my clientele, and working to design day-to-day experiences to build toward their future success, I was able to gain the respect of students who recognized someone wanting them to succeed. Many secondary special education students need first to learn that someone believes in them before choosing to risk believing in themselves.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Group A (80 hours)</td></tr>
<tr><td>A6: In my opinion, students will work for you if they know the teacher cares about them. This comes in all forms. If I barked orders and demanded every student sit in their chair and immediately get to work, I`d be met with resistance. If I asked students how their weekend was, or their day or about other classes and show genuine interest, students will be less resistant.</td></tr>
</table>

A5: I believe that special educators could show the students they care by building personal relationships with each child creating trust and comfort. I believe this can be taught by (a) telling why it is important and how it is implemented. (b) by modeling this behavior as a professor to the pre-service special educators and as a teacher in the special education rooms.	
Group B (30-79 hours)	
B5: There are many things that a Special education teacher can do to impact their students learning, the first of which is building a relationship. Without a relationship to the student, the student will feel no extra desire to do work or make any effort if they feel that it will not be appreciated to respected. This can be taught to pre- service special B4: A time that I had after I got into the classroom for field placement that demonstrated for me that I was prepared and it was something I knew I could use was one of the student just did not want to work with me that day and he was struggling in some subjects. I let him talk for a couple minutes and managed to tie it in with the subject we needed to work on and then he started to work with me. Building that relationship is key.	
Interview: V21: I always think it takes almost a year to get to know your student fully before you're at that aha moment where you can say, "Now I know where we need to go. We were missing this, or we need to do this better." Once the relationship is formed and the students know you, then will work for you. A8: I think the keys to building that relationship for me is to give as much respect to the student as you can or their wishes, when you can see their routine and how they prefer to do things in the classroom, to try not to push too hard, but to still ... I like to remind my student just about every ten minutes if I see them doing something good or bad. B10: It was really important to build a relationship with my student. I met him at his level, recognizing the things he did right, and then just suggesting ways that he could improve what he had. When helping him with his science, it was my job to figure out what the teacher wanted, and then figure out a way that I could make him understand that. That felt really good, and it felt like we made a connection there.	

Appendix P

Uncommon Theme: Experiences in working with parents

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Common Theme: Experiences in working with parents</th></tr>
<tr><td>Veteran Special Education Teacher</td><td>The Researcher</td></tr>
<tr><td>V5: I do not feel that my teaching program prepared me for working with my students' families either. At times my job is very heart-breaking, as I work with many families/students that have gone through so much hardship, and I feel as if I can never do enough.

V14: New teachers need to understand and be taught that the parents of their students often have the same problems as their children. They may have had horrible role models for parents themselves. It helps when I remember that. They need to understand that empathy and direction are often needed from the parents</td><td rowspan="4">It took me a long time to learn the importance of working with parents and building a trusting relationship. This includes saying hello in the grocery store and engaging in conversation with them about their child. It has been so important to share the good news about the child on a continual basis, that way when the bad news comes, they trust you.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Group A (80 hours)</td></tr>
<tr><td>None</td></tr>
<tr><td>Group B (30-79 hours)

None</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Interview
“It is so important to understand how to work with parent. I'm thinking of a specific situation in my first year of teaching when I first got my classroom and I asked myself, how do I talk with this parent who is considering that her child may fall under the ability of special education? I would say that was probably one of the harder things that I think I</td></tr>
</table>

probably had to do my first year of teaching compared to anything else…new teachers need to be coached on how to work with a parents and understand what to say to them" Group A: None Group B: None

Appendix Q

Uncommon Theme: An Understanding of how to Work with Paraprofessionals

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Uncommon Theme: An Understanding of how to Work with Parapros</th></tr>
<tr><td>Veteran Special Education Teacher</td><td rowspan="6">The Researcher

“I believe, paraprofessionals can be utilized best for one-on-one instruction, but they could also start a class and be empowered to help teach. When I first entered special education, I had the parapros grade papers and walk kids to the bathroom for monitoring, however, I now utilize them for their strengths and train them to teach with me. They are always assigned a group of kids to work with and I listen for their recommendations.’</td></tr>
<tr><td>V1: In my coursework, I was not prepared for handling parent issues, or managing and utilizing paraprofessional staff. These are all skills that I needed to learn.

V20: My first teaching position was working in a classroom at a center-based program for emotionally challenged kids. It was so far removed from what I had learned in college. For one thing I was in charge of 5 paraprofessionals. There had been no coursework about that.

V20: Another aspect that came as an unknown aspect was the management of the classroom staff.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Group A (80 hours)</td></tr>
<tr><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Group B (30-79 hours)</td></tr>
<tr><td></td></tr>
</table>

Interview
V4: Additionally, I never learned to work with parapros in my undergraduate. With my current job, my parapros serve as my left and right hand. It is a relief to have them work with me in my room. It took me a while to learn to utilize them.

Appendix R

Responses from the interview question: "What you foresee there might be unique challenges to teaching special education in a rural area are opposed to in a more urban environment?
V4: From my perspective in the rural area, I learned that you certainly cannot be just one person. Which that's not what they ever taught me in my teacher preparation program… they always us that special education would be taught in collaboration, consultation, all those different key words. I would have to say the reality of being not only a teacher but being a mom to these students. I also play role of a social worker, to being a counselor, to being a dad figure sometimes to the boys. I guess being that whole piece that the students need. I even teach them how to do the whip and the nay nay, the dance.
V21: I think we all have our challenges, and they're vastly different. My concern about rural is access to just the community, of being able to get to the different agencies that can support us. In rural schools, you're smaller, so a lot of times the Special Ed department is a one-person solo job, which some people can handle, but it takes a team to develop a good solid plan for a Special Ed child. I think poverty is much different than in an urban school, and they both impact school directly. A lot of that generational poverty seems to be in the rural areas, which impacts a kid's motivation and without those accesses to a good team outside of the school, your hands are limited. We've become very creative in how we can help our students.
A2: There's more resources in the urban area, they could have bigger schools with more teachers, there may be 5 classrooms and each classroom's split up by similarities. Whereas in a rural area there's probably less classrooms and it's a melting pot of students.
A8: In the rural area I believe there would be more opportunity to build a relationship with the students as you might have them for more of the day and for multiple subjects. You might see them in Walmart and even be their little league coach if your children go to the same district, where in an urban area it's the teacher may have a weaker relationship with students as the job might be only focused subject areas for one hour or so a day. The direct contact with students for an extended amount of time would probably be much less.
B6: From what I have seen in the rural area, I think I would need to be jack-of-all-trades and teach everything all day. I may have to teach more than one grade at one time, and have a mix of ... if I'm at a high school, freshman through seniors. Even if they're sophomore standing, they could be at a freshman level, so I'd need to teach all these different levels of language arts, all these different levels of math, all these different levels of science all in the same period, because I am the only teacher. I have seen high schools, I mean special education classrooms, that have a range from physical disabilities to cognitive disabilities, or just a lower reading level.

B10: I think it might be harder to find opportunities for kids. If they're part of an IEP, having to do a couple things a year that will get them towards what they want to be in the future, and what they want to be in the future is limited around that area

TABLES

Table 1

Veteran and Pre-Service Special Education Teacher Comparative Chart

Number of veteran teachers in the Rural ISD Area with 8 or more years of experience	54 selected with 30 surveys completed
Group A: Number of pre-service teachers with 80 or more hours of clinical experience completed	12 selected with 12 surveys completed
Group B: Number of pre-service teachers with 30-79 hours of clinical experience completed	13 selected with 13 surveys completed

Table 2

Veteran Special Education Teacher Participant Characteristics

Participant	Experience	Gender
V1	15 years	Female
V2	16 years	Female
V3	23 years	Female
V4	16 years	Female
V5	8 years	Female
V6	8 years	Female
V7	34 years	Female
V8	12 years	Female
V9	12 years	Female
V10	13 years	Female
V11	10 years	Male
V12	9 years	Female
V13	10 years	Female
V14	26 years	Female
V15	9 years	Female
V16	12 years	Female
V17	35 years	Male
V18	9 years	Male
V19	11 years	Female
V20	41 years	Female
V21	8 years	Female
V22	10 years	Female
V23	22 years	Female
V24	28 years	Female
V25	18 years	Female
V26	32 years	Female
V27	10 years	Female
V28	13 years	Female
V29	15 years	Female
V30	14 years	Female

Table 3

Group A 80+ Hour Special Education Pre-Service Teacher Participant Characteristics

Participant	Experience	Gender
A1	120 hours	Female
A2	120 hours	Female
A3	120 hours	Female
A4	120 hours	Male
A5	80 hours	Female
A6	120 hours	Female
A7	120 hours	Female
A8	80 hours	Female
A9	80 hours	Female
A10	80 hours	Female
A11	80 hours	Female
A12	80 hours	Female

Table 4

Group B 30-79 Hour Special Education Pre-Service Teacher Participant Characteristics

Participant	Experience	Gender
B1	48 hours	Female
B2	30 hours	Female
B3	30 hours	Female
B4	30 hours	Female
B5	30 hours	Female
B6	30 hours	Female
B7	30 hours	Female
B8	30 hours	Female
B9	30 hours	Male
B10	30 hours	Female
B11	30 hours	Male
B12	30 hours	Male
B13	30 hours	Female

Table 5

An Understanding of How to Work with Paraprofessionals

Andragogical Assumption	**Recommendations**
Concept of the learner (move from dependent learners to independent learners)	The instructor should help the pre-service teacher understand the critical importance of utilizing support staff by discussing how to manage instruction when other adults are available to help.
The role of learners' experience (draw on their or others experience)	Bring paraprofessionals to class as guest speakers, and discussions to facilitate learning of the how and why to plan for support staff in the classroom. Provide clinical experiences
Readiness to learn (experience a need to learn)	Opportunities should be embedded within coursework and clinical experiences to help a pre-service teacher practice planning for support staff in the classroom. For example, as a part of lesson planning, plans for the paraprofessionals to work with a group or individual should be made. The lesson should be conducted in the clinical setting with feedback from the cooperating teacher and/or college instructor.
Orientation to learning (organized learning experience)	An organized curriculum for teaching managing support staff should, at minimum, be incorporated into the upper level classes leading.

Table 6

Experiences of How to Work with Parents

Andragogical Assumption	**Recommendations**
Concept of the learner (move from dependent learners to independent learners)	The instructor should help the pre-service teacher understand the importance (and legal issues) of working with parents. The pre-service teachers learn how to communicate effectively. Inviting special education attorneys or directors to be guest speakers on campus may help lay foundational understanding.
The role of learners' experience (draw on their or others experience)	Provide clinical experiences, such as attending an IEP parent teacher conference, or calling a parent for the pre-service teachers to attend as they watch expert teachers work with parents.
Readiness to learn (experience a need to learn)	Provide experiences in which the pre-service teacher is responsible for communicating with the parent of a child in the clinical setting.
Orientation to learning (organized learning experience)	An organized curriculum for teaching IDEA stipulations for working with parents as well as building communication skills (and even offering support) needs to be emphasized in the upper-level coursework.

Table 7

Varying and Multiple Ongoing Experiences in the Clinical Setting Example Activity

Andragogical Assumption	**Recommendations**
Concept of the learner (move from dependent learners to independent learners)	Develop an individualized learning contract with the student before going into the field which is individualized for their growth to becoming an independent learner
The role of learners' experience (draw on their or others experience)	Facilitate a group discussion on campus about a clinical setting may allow for each pre-service teacher to share their clinical experience and help other set their goals to achieve progressive learning
Readiness to learn (experience a need to learn)	Provide clinical experiences in which the learner can experience a gap in their learning, like trying to teach a child who is not ready to learn a concept.
Orientation to learning (organized learning experience)	Plan sequential clinical experiences in varying grade levels and categories of special education with opportunities to participate in multiple types of service models (co-taught, pull-out).

Table 8
Provide an In-depth Understanding of the IEP Process

Andragogical Assumption	**Recommendations**
Concept of the learner (move from dependent learners to independent learners)	To help build an understanding of IDEA and the purpose of an IEP, invite a parent of a special needs child to campus to explain the purpose of the IEP and how it has affected the life of their child.
The role of learners' experience (draw on their or others experience)	As special education pre-service teacher write an IEP, an expert teacher or panel of expert teachers and faculty should be present to answer questions to facilitate as learning, review the legalities of the IEP, and begin to coach the student into understanding that in a rural area, they may be responsible for the process from beginning to end.
Readiness to learn (experience a need to learn)	Provide clinical experiences in which the learner can experience a gap in their learning, like asking them to play the role of a member of the IEP team and expecting them to discuss assessment results.
Orientation to learning (organized learning experience)	Plan sequential clinical experiences that facilitate master of the IEP process and review and practice the sequence in each course leading to certification.

Table 9
Ongoing Coaching of Assessment Practices and Using Data

Andragogical Assumption	**Recommendations**
Concept of the learner (move from dependent learners to independent learners)	The instructor should model how to proctor multiple assessment (e.g. Reading, Math, Writing, Transition) in the course and be present in the clinical setting when the pre-service teachers conduct the assessment for the first time to assist as needed.
The role of learners' experience (draw on their or others experience)	Pre-service special education teacher need to have the opportunity talk together about the assessments used, proctoring, complications that occurred, results that were found, and plan to use the data, they can learn from each other about how to assess a student and monitor growth.
Readiness to learn (experience a need to learn)	As pre-service teachers experience frustration with giving assessment, the instructor should be available to help the student and individual coaching and class discussion should occur to clarify.
Orientation to learning (organized learning experience)	An organized curriculum for teaching assessment will provide experiences from which the students can conceptualize the purpose of data collection, understand how to proctor the assessment and collect the data, interpret the data to pinpoint the special-needs student's areas of weakness and then construct a year-long curriculum map which targets the instructional areas while at the same time give the special-needs student access to the grade level curriculum standards. This process should be reinforced throughout the years of study in the program so that the special education pre-service teacher can master this essential skill.

Table 10

A Solid Foundation of How to Build Relationships with Students

Andragogical Assumption	**Recommendations**
Concept of the learner (move from dependent learners to independent learners)	The instructor should help the pre-service teacher understand the critical importance of building a relationship with students and use case studies, guest speakers, and discussions toward that goal.
The role of learners' experience (draw on their or others experience)	Pre-service special education teachers need to have the opportunity to discuss how to build a relationship with a child and participate in class discussion with peers and with expert special education teachers so they can envision an effective relationship with students with special needs.
Readiness to learn (experience a need to learn)	Opportunities should be embedded within coursework and clinical experiences to help a pre-service teacher practice building a relationship with a child. For example, as a class assignment, after lessons on how to build a relationship with a child, the instructor could coordinate study sessions with the local probate court system, providing help for students needing a mentor.
Orientation to learning (organized learning experience)	An organized curriculum (supplemented by clinical practice) for teaching building relationships with students should be emphasized for the duration of special education teacher preparation program.

FIGURES

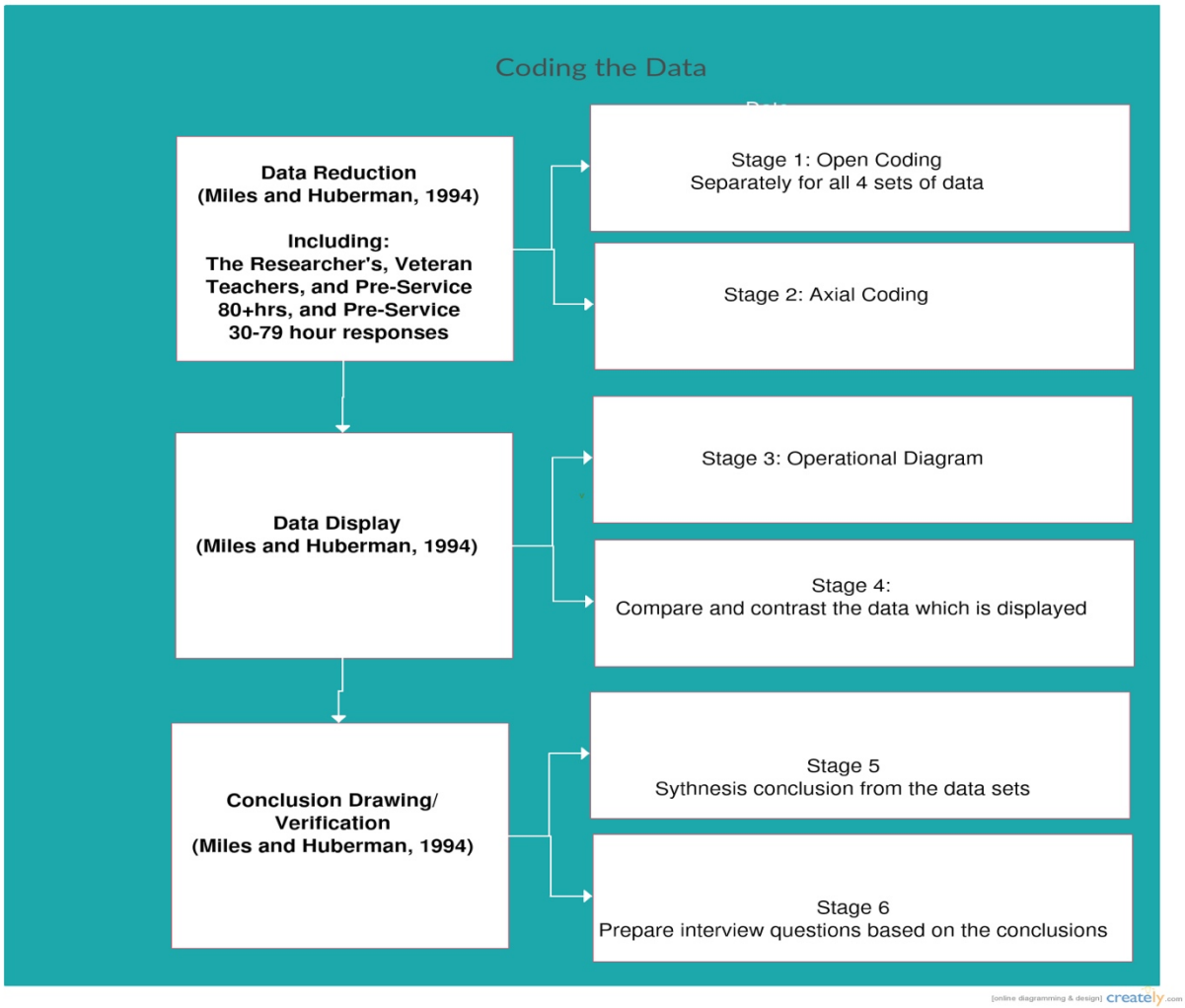


Figure 1. The researcher's survey data coding process.

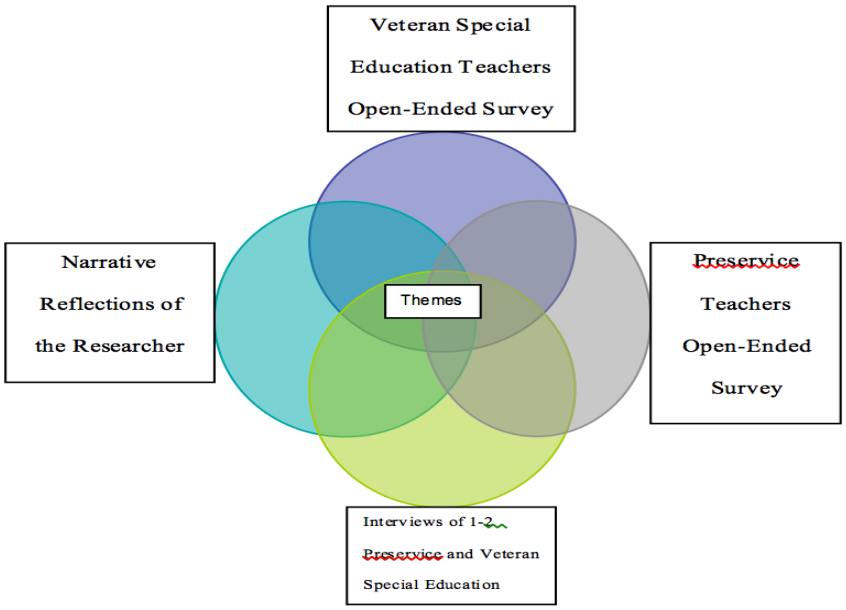


Figure 2. Data analysis interface. The collection and comparison of data to determine themes.

Common Themes:	Veteran	A	B	Researcher
1. Varying and multiple experiences in the clinical setting	✓	✓	✓	✓
2. In-depth understanding of the IEP Process	✓	✓	✓	✓
3. Ongoing coaching of assessment practices and using data	✓	✓	✓	✓
4. A solid foundation of how to build relationships with students	✓	✓	✓	✓
No Common Themes:	**Veteran**	**A**	**B**	**Researcher**
1. An understanding of how to work with paraprofessionals	✓			✓
2. Experiences of how to work with parents	✓			✓

Figure 3. Distinct variations in perceptions between veteran and pre-service special education teachers.