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## **“For all my students, I just want them to love learning, I just want them to love life. To love the possibility of who they are”: A Qualitative Study Investigating the Multifaceted Roles of Special Educators at a Small Autism School in the Hudson Valley**

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“For all my students, I just want them to love learning, I just want them to love life. To love the possibility of who they are”: A Qualitative Study Investigating the Multifaceted Roles of Special Educators at a Small Autism School in the Hudson Valley

Senior Project Submitted to The Division of Science, Mathematics, and Computing

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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To my family, thank you for always believing in me even when I did not believe in myself.

To learn more about the center for spectrum services:

<https://centerforspectrumservices.org/>

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## Introduction

### Purpose

I started working at the Center for Spectrum Services in April of 2022. It was my first semester at Bard and I simply needed a job. I had spent the previous 2 years working at Starbucks. I'll admit that I never thought I would work with children, let alone children on the spectrum. Yet, somehow, when a job for a teacher's assistant came up, I quickly applied and thought nothing of it. The day I was called in for an interview, I forgot I even applied. I didn't know what to expect. I met with a lovely man who made working at The Center sound so special, like an act that extends past a simple job. He talked about his grandson with autism and how unique it is to work with students on the spectrum. I understood exactly what he meant very quickly.

Working at The Center was the first time I spent an extended amount of time with children. My first day at The Center, I was in a classroom with 6-8 year olds. I went up to a child and asked what his name was. The teacher gently told me that he is unlikely to respond. Most of the children in this class were nonverbal. I realized that nonverbal does not mean unable to communicate. I learned that these children show love in such unique ways.

A few weeks ago one of my roommates said she loved working with children because they're "so unique, and so themselves". I've been thinking about that description a lot as I've been finishing my thesis. I think I've been confused about what a thesis is. I'm realizing it's supposed to be a compilation of what I've been taught to do at Bard. How I'm supposed to be a young academic, and this paper should point to what future directions I want my career to follow. In understanding the phrase that children are so great because they're so unique and themselves,

I also have to understand that my personal experience at Bard is so great because of the uniqueness of my job at The Center. I constantly learned how to be a better educator, how to self regulate on-the-go, and how to identify my own sensory needs. All the most interesting things I've learned about psychology at Bard have been better understood by interacting with people with individual differences. I find that my job as a teacher's assistant lives in an intersection, so unlike any job I've had before. It feels like being a part of a community to take care of children. What an honor it is to be trusted by parents to ensure their children's safety, emotional growth and academic achievement.

In this thesis, I hope to demonstrate the unique lived experiences of 6 educators through qualitative psychological research. Special education is such a critical part of identifying and treating autism in children, yet there have been little studies which seek to understand how educators conceptualize their roles (Prather-Jones, 2011). This research seeks to unravel what 'makes' a special educator, in hopes to add to literature on educator experiences and perspectives. I also hope to situate these experiences through a historical understanding of disability, autism, activism, and special education. All of these contexts serve to further enrich my set of data. I also aim to provide background on why I chose a qualitative methodology, especially in the psychological discipline. Lastly, I hope to contextualize the lived experiences of these educators using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.

## **Historical Context**

### ***Historical Understanding of Disability***

Societal prejudice towards those with disabilities reaches back centuries. It was a norm for those with disabilities to be hidden from public view. (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Fortunately, visibility for those with disabilities is more and more common in the 21st century. While the

focus of this paper is on special educators and psychologists (called educators in this paper) in a small autism school in the Hudson Valley, historical context is required to understand the present. ‘Western Society’, known in this paper as Europe and North America, first turned its interest on people with disabilities with the French Enlightenment movement (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Philosophical inquiries about human nature and intelligence permeated epistemological spaces (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Physicians inspired by this enlightenment movement looked into evidence-based practices of how to improve the skills of those with disabilities (or those with difference) (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015).

The first systematic momentum for educating students with differences came with educating blind and deaf students (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Favorable results lead to many physicians turning their attention to those with developmental disabilities (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Physicians often held intensive 1-1 instruction for their developmental disabled patients (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). One such example is the French physician Jean-Marc Gaspard Itard who had a strong belief that his patient could become a productive member of society with appropriate instruction (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). His method inspired systematic training programs for those with developmental disabilities (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015).

In the mid 1800s, societal economic motivation led to vocational institutions developed with the intention of training those with disabilities to enter the workforce (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Those unable to work, often were institutionalized (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). While this was the first time Western Society organized itself systematically to provide for those with disabilities, it was not necessarily humane (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Disability rights movements shifted focus towards civil rights when the poor conditions of institutions were publicized (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). People with disabilities were often housed in the same

spaces as incarcerated individuals, despite not committing any crimes (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). These institutions were sites of “extreme neglect and abuse” (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). With the disability civil rights movement came the advocacy for “hospitals, schools, and training facilities” to have systematic, evidence based practices treating and/or educating those with disabilities (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015).

Social theorists and scientists began questioning the extent to which those with disabilities can assimilate into society in the mid 1800s (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). These questions followed the Eugenics movement, in which scientists and social theorists believed in “the purposeful reproduction of the “best stock” and restrictive eugenics to limit the “unfit” from reproducing (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Western Society was groomed to understand people with disabilities as being a threat to their general wellbeing, therefore legislation barring children with disabilities from schools became common practice (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Recently developed intelligence tests were used to prove inability in those with disabilities. Legislation in the early 1900s, such as the *Buck v Bell* upheld that sterilization of the disabled is constitutional (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015).

Western society has always had dominant ideas of where those with disabilities belong (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). While evidence-based practices opened up the possibility of systematic treatment, ideas around immorality and eugenics facilitated poor institutional care for those with disability (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). In arguing for a more equitable society, it is imperative for all citizens to receive fair and appropriate services. Early programs for the disabled were far from perfect, but were keystones developing in contemporary special education. People with disabilities can make strides in learning new skills.



### ***History of diagnostic criteria for autism and developmental disorders: DSM III-DSM V***

Autism as a constellation of symptoms was first described by Austrian American psychiatrist Leo Kanner in 1943 (Vivanti and Messinger, 2021). Kanner observed 11 children and categorized their behaviors as (1) 'autism', or social withdrawal and (2) resistance to change/insistence on sameness (Vivanti and Messinger, 2021). Prior to Kanner's observations, marked characteristics of autism, such as body rocking and hand flapping have been observed as early as the 1700s (Vivanti and Messinger, 2021). The word 'autism' comes from Greek, meaning 'self'-ism (Vivanti and Messinger, 2021). Prior to the DSM-3, autism was a specifier of schizophrenia, in which patients withdraw into themselves (Vivanti and Messinger, 2021). In the DSM II published in 1968, autism symptomatology was categorized as childhood onset schizophrenia (Vivanti and Messinger, 2021).

Psychology's historical understanding of autism (ASD) radically differs from our conceptualization of the disorder today. Research on psychoanalysis specifically targeted for populations with ASD is sparse. However, psychodynamic theorizing of symptoms now associated with ASD posits that it is a disorder which is "neither neurotic nor psychotic, but [shows] striking disturbances in developmental balance and progression" (Alpert, 1957). Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, posits there to be 5 stages of development, which are oral (birth-1yr), anal (1-3 yrs), phallic (3-6 yrs), latency (6-puberty), and genital (puberty-death) (Freud, 1949). One theory is that those with ASD are 'stuck' in pre latent development (Alpert, 1957). Essentially, a psychoanalytic way of saying that there is a developmental delay. Psychoanalysis paid particular attention to parents of children they determined to be pre-latent. Such is the case in a case study for a pre latent child named Carol, in which the psychoanalyst states the etiology of her developmental delay is "deprivation of consistent and satisfying

mothering during infancy, due to the pathology of the mother as well as the many mother substitutes [babysitters, female clinicians etc]” (Alpert,1957).

Psychological discipline shifted away from psychoanalysis to empiricism in the late 60s to early 70s (Vivanti and Messinger, 2021). In the 1980s, cognitive science highly influenced psychological disciplines and subsequently, theories around autism shifted in focus (Vivanti and Messinger, 2021). Autism started to be conceptualized in terms of cognitive deficit(Vivanti and Messinger,2021). With this emphasis on empirical data, cognitive psychology conceptualized autism as having impairments of theory of mind (calculations of what others are thinking), central coherence (integration of details into coherent wholes), and executive dysfunction (Baron-Cohen, 1990; Mitchell et al, 2021; Vivanti & Messinger, 2021). Autism was added to the DSM-III (published in 1980) and was understood as a developmental disorder. ASD was characterized by “delayed and deviant social and language abilities beyond general developmental level, as well as restricted interest and repetitive behaviors—all within onset of early life” (Rosen et al, 2021). ASD was medicalized and studied through empirical disciplines such as neuroscience, and biology with the hope of producing a comprehensive theory of autism and subsequent treatment (Vivanti & Messinger, 2021). Several studies sought to find a single origin cause of autism. However, “such research failed to provide unequivocal support for one competing model over the other, leading to a growing disenchantment with the ‘primary cognitive deficit’ accounts of autism” (Vivanti and Messinger, 2021).

Research therefore shifted into a quantitative model viewing autism as a continuum of traits, and research focused on examining specific phenomena typically associated with autism, but also applicable to nonclinical populations (Rosen et al, 2021). ICD-10, published in 1992, approached developmental disorders with a categorical orientation (Rosen et al, 2021). It

included several developmental disorders, such as Asperger syndrome and Rett's disorder. The structuring of the DSM-IV took on a similar approach, critiquing the DSM-3's definition of developmental disorders to be too broad. However, the decision to "categorize the heterogeneity of autism into empirically-defined subcategories" was controversial (Rosen et al, 2021). One critique was that the specificity of developmental disorders was not necessary for treatment of patients (Rosen et al, 2021)..

With these critiques in mind, the DSM-5 categorized autism as a disorder with a core symptom profile and a range of symptom severity (Rosen et al, 2021). This dimensional approach "captures the homogeneity of core ASD symptoms with the aim of relatively high specificity, while allowing for the heterogeneity in the quantity and quality of symptoms" (Rosen et al, 2021). Conceptualizing autism in this manner "resulted in improved diagnostic specificity and good diagnostic sensitivity, with over 90% of children with PDDs (pervasive developmental disorders) meeting DSM-5 ASD (autism spectrum disorder) Criteria" (Rosen et al, 2021). The dimensional approach to ASD allows for researchers to use quantitative measures of symptoms to predict outcomes, while clinicians and service providers could rely on qualitative information about symptoms to assess what supports an individual needs (Rosen et al, 2021).

Since one comprehensive theory of autism has yet to be established, current researchers have started to examine other conceptualizations around autism (Vivanti & Messinger, 2021). Recently, researchers and clinicians have begun to look at biopsychosocial models of disability, as opposed to a medical model (Vivanti & Messinger, 2021). Medical models view autism as an illness which needs a cure, while biopsychosocial models identify barriers which prevent people with autism from living a "full and decent life with dignity" (Vivanti & Messinger, 2021). More and more clinicians now view a positive outcome as self-reliance and participation in

communities (Vivanti & Messinger, 2021). This is a shift from previous positive outcomes, which focused on increasing IQ points, and behavior modification (Vivanti & Messinger, 2021)).

### ***History of Special Education***

When children with developmental disorders, emotional disturbances, and/or traumatic brain injuries attempted to gain education in public schools, their exclusion was not only expected but legal (Yell, 2022). In 1958, the Illinois Supreme Court held that compulsory education laws did not apply to children with disabilities (Yell, 2022). In 1969, North Carolina stated that it was illegal for parents to re-enroll children with disabilities who were previously dismissed from school (Yell, 2022).

Momentum for the contemporary Special education reformation movement was started by the 1954 keystone case *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka Kansas* (Yell, 2022). *Brown v Board* involved a young African American girl denied admittance to an all-white school (Yell, 2022). Her father, along with parents of schoolchildren from four other states subsequently filed a class-action lawsuit, alleging that “segregated public schools were inherently unequal and deprived them of equal protection of the law” (*Brown*). While *Brown v Board* is most known for declaring race based segregation in schools unconstitutional, the ruling stated “state-sanctioned segregation solely on the basis of a person’s unchangeable characteristics” was unconstitutional (*Brown*). Unchangeable characteristics included a child’s sex, race, and disability. *Brown* was one of the first parent-led movements for children’s equal rights (Yell, 2022). This inspired the National Association of Parents and Friends of Mentally Retarded Children (called the Arc now) to systematically file lawsuits against several school districts, since children with developmental disabilities were often excluded from public schooling (Yell, 2022).

Reasons for dismissal could be wandering around classrooms, health related absences, and brain injury. One lawsuit facilitated by the Arc was *Mills vs Board of Education of District of Columbia* (Yell, 2022). Previous to this lawsuit, the District of Columbia school system dismissed children with disabilities from schools if their behavior was found disruptive to typically developing children (Yell, 2022.) In 1972, the U.S. district of Washington, D.C. ruled in favor of *Mills*, stating that “The District of Columbia shall provide to each child of school age a free and suitable publicly supported education regardless of the degree of the child’s mental, physical, or emotional disability or impairment”(Mills). This case was a keystone in building the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), which was formerly the 1975 Education for all Handicapped Children Act (EAHC) (Yell, 2022) .

Before the 1975 IDEA, an estimated 4 million children with disabilities were denied free and appropriate k-12 education (Burke and Boccia, 2020). IDEA has 4 provisions:

- 1) students with special needs have a right to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE), made available in either public or private school;
- 2) Schools must work with students to design IEPs (Individualized education plans) for students with special needs;
- 3) In school, children should be taught in the “least restrictive environment” possible; and
- 4) parents have due process rights under the law to appeal the education accommodations made or not made for their child. (Burke and Boccia, 2020)

The free and appropriate (FAPE) provision under IDEA arose from district schools failing to appropriately meet the needs of their students (Burke and Boccia, 2020). Many states had laws which permitted the exclusion of “children who were blind, deaf, or who have

developmental delays from accessing education” (Burke and Boccia, 2020). Like the *Mills* case, in which the Washington, D.C. school district cited that their exclusion of educating students with disabilities was due to lack of funding (Burke and Boccia, 2020). FAPE ensured that districts must have resources for special education, and in the event that they did not have appropriate resources, they must pay for placement of the student in an appropriate setting (Burke and Boccia, 2020). Private placements could be facilitated by a 1) district pursuit or 2) parents’ request. Students in private placements often “have multiple disabilities, experience “emotional disturbance”, or are on the autism spectrum” (Burke and Boccia, 2020).

Education “is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is the principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment” (*Brown*). All children benefit from education, and society also benefits from providing youth with appropriate education. Failing to meet the needs of students with disabilities does society a disservice and puts youth at greater risk for incarceration (*Addressing the needs of youth with disabilities*). An upward of 50% of incarcerated youth have a special education disability (*Addressing the needs of youth with disabilities*). Children with learning disabilities “were found to be more than twice as likely to commit a delinquent offense” (*Addressing the needs of youth with disabilities*).

### **“Treatments” ASD “management”**

There are several evidence based practices for the management of behaviors associated with ASD. However, the conceptualization of autism being a disorder which needs to be treated and subsequently cured remains controversial (Mitchell et al, 2021). An alternative lens to view ASD is through a social-developmental perspective, which is defined as an assumption that “development is shaped by the kind of responses and reactions we experience when we

encounter others” (Mitchell et al, 2021). How neurotypical people (or people without neurodevelopmental delay/impairment) perceive those with ASD is a subject which is understudied (Mitchell et al, 2021). The inner states of those with ASD is a prevalent research topic. Theory of mind, or the ability to infer the inner states of others, is cited to be impaired in individuals with ASD (Baron-Cohen, 1990). Neglecting to account for how neurotypical people infer the inner states of ASD creates a paradigm known as the “double empathy problem”. This refers to the idea posed by Milton that “autistic people have difficulty fitting into society not just because they misunderstand others but also because they are misunderstood by others” (Mitchell et al, 2021). Through this lens, we can understand that social difficulties associated with autism can be due to the different communication styles of autistic and non autistic individuals.

One type of ‘treatment’ of autism is ABA, or applied behavioral analysis. This method has been touted by proponents to be the “only scientifically validated method of treating or curing autism” (Kirkham, 2017). ABA operates through the medical model of autism, in which it is a developmental disorder which subsequently can be cured through empirically valid practices (Kirkham, 2017). Its roots are in the behavioralism movement of the 1910s (Kirkham, 2017). ABA’s “underlying assumption” is that “behavior could be modified through rewards and punishment” (Kirkham, 2017). In classrooms, this often looks like token boards. A token is awarded to a student every time they complete a task, then once the student completes all tasks, they are rewarded with a high preference item, such as a piece of candy or free time on the iPad. Negative (or unwanted) behaviors, such as yelling are often ignored, or not rewarded with high preference items. The goal of ABA within the school setting is to increase positive behaviors through rewards and decrease negative behaviors (hitting, yelling, biting) through ignoring or limiting availability to a preferred item(Kirkham, 2017).

The roots of behaviorism are often regarded in a negative light. Many studies conducted through the early 20th century behaviorism movement would be considered unethical today. Some examples are the studies Ferster conducted in which he locked an autistic child in a room everyday for a year and neglected to respond to a child's crying (Kirkham, 2017). Eventually the crying stopped. This led Ferster to conclude that mothers who responded to the child's tantrums caused autism (Kirkham, 2017). This phenomenon was referred to as the "smother mother" theory (Kirkham, 2017). Another phenomena called the "refrigerator mother" theory blamed autism on parental lack of attention (Kirkham, 2017).

### ***'Autism moms'***

The notion that autism can be blamed on bad parenting is unfortunately an idea that has persisted up until present day. Early child rearing is a gendered feminine social role (Lilley, 2011). Unfortunately, mothers are still 'blamed' for negative or unwanted behaviors associated with autism (Lilley, 2011). Although autism is now broadly understood as "a biological disorder of unknown etiology (Sigman, Spence, and Wang 2006: 341), with findings consistently suggesting a genetic basis (Frith 2003: 70-72)" the burden of care for individuals with autism is primarily placed on mothers" (Lilley, 2011). Mothers are often tasked with finding the best treatment approaches, staying up to date with new pedagogic practices, and advocating for their children to receive the best care possible (Lilley, 2011). This makes being an 'autism mom' something of a full-time job (Lilley, 2011). This 'full-time job' also comes with hefty emotional labor, with mothers managing both the emotions of their children as well as the emotional perceptions of their parenting.

In 2008, well known radio host Michael Savage announced that he believed autism to be a disorder caused by lack of a paternal figure (Lilley, 2011). This belief that behaviors associated



with autism can be blamed on mothers' role in parenting is one with historical roots, as I previously discussed behaviorism's blame on negative behaviors associated with autism to be associated with mothers being either too involved (smother mother) or too uninvolved (refrigerator mother). In any case, mothers are both expected to care for their autistic child with clinical intensity and in the same breath, are demonized for the roles they occupy in their child's lives (Lilley, 2011). Early intervention programs, therapeutic practices, and special education programs have all led to the diminished role of residential programs and institutionalization in treatments of individuals with autism (Lilley, 2011). However, the increased responsibility of parents, particularly mothers, in the treatment of children with autism, is something that needs to be recognized (Lilley, 2011).

### ***Bias in Identifying ASD***

Diagnosing ASD and determining a child's educational placement is a subjective process. Essentially, diagnosis and course of treatment for childhood disorders is of the discretion of special educators, psychologists, and parents. It is critical to understand the perspectives of these actors (special educators, psychologists, and parents) in order to reduce any bias. Black children, on average, receive an autism diagnosis a year or more later than their white peers (Mandell et al, 2002). However, black children are more than twice as likely to receive a diagnosis of conduct disorder than white children (Mandell et al, 2007), despite prevalence of ASD being similar across racial/ethnic backgrounds (Fombonne, 2003). Conduct Disorder is in the DSM-5 under the Disruptive, Impulse-Control category (DSM 5). Conduct Disorder is defined by "a repetitive and persistent pattern of behavior in which the basic rights of others or major-age appropriate social norms or rules are violated," (DSM-5). Black children's rates of

diagnosis of Conduct Disorder contribute to the stigma that black children in special education settings are somehow more dangerous than their white peers (Obeid et al, 2021).

Black children in special education settings are also “not getting the equal treatment, instruction, and academic benefits of their peers” (Graves and Ye, 2016). Additionally, black children are more likely to be placed in more restrictive settings, compared to their white peers (Graves and Ye, 2016). All of these factors have contributed to research efforts which focus on whether or not black children are receiving correct diagnoses and placements in special education. An ethnographic study performed by Harry and Klingner (2014), concluded that the placement process, (which is a collaboration between teachers, school psychologists, and parents), is a subjective and flawed process. Service providers expressed concern regarding disproportionate racial representation (Harry and Klingner, 2014). . Despite these flaws, service providers believe that special education is the best way for children to receive services (Harry and Klingner, 2014).

The high ratio of males diagnosed with ASD than females is a less understood characteristic (Goldman, 2013). While biological differences between sexes have been often implicated in the higher prevalence of males with autism, the role of gender has been less understood (Goldman, 2013). Current instruments used to diagnose ASD have been “standardized using male cohorts” and very little studies have been conducted on these instruments sensitivity to gender (Goldman, 2013). In western society, girls are socialized to be more empathetic than boys, therefore their prevalence of externalizing behaviors, such as aggression has to be higher than boys in order to receive diagnosis (Goldman, 2013).

Awareness of the personal, subjective, and biased process of identifying and treating ASD can hopefully lead to more culturally appropriate determinations for who meets the criteria

for ASD. While this current study does not ask educators questions regarding race or gender, I included this literature in order to capture the intersectional nature of the work of a special educator. Their decisions ultimately determine who receives appropriate services.

## **Contemporary Context**

### ***Contemporary Special Education and Student Outcomes***

School based services are empirically proven to be the most effective way to provide care for students, especially students in rural areas (Eckert et al, 2017). Outside of the school system, barriers to providing care for children include “(a) lack of financial resources or insurance; (b) lack of transportation or childcare; (c) long waiting lists and intake processes; and (d) stigma of mental health and mistrust of providers from previous experiences” (Eckert et al, 2017). Due to these barriers and many more, only 36% of children with a lifelong mental disorder receive services (Eckert et al, 2017). Of that 36%, over 75% receive services in schools (Eckert et al, 2017). Schools provide a critical part in making sure communities are properly served. School based mental health services in the context of a school organized around serving children with autism often takes the shape of individualized education plans or IEPs. IEPs are a requirement under federal law for any child receiving IDEA services (Burke & Boccia, 2020). IEPs usually consist of teachers, school psychologists, parents, and any other service providers. In providing free and appropriate education services, schools are contributing to building good future citizens. School based mental health services are empirically proven to decrease discipline referrals (Greenberg et al, 2005; Thurlow and Johnson, 2011) and relieve systematic economic and social burdens (Lochman & The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 2006; National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse).

Thus, special educators play a crucial role in ensuring children live meaningful lives . Not only are educators teaching students, but they are also a critical part in ensuring children receive their appropriate services. However, the United States is currently facing a crisis of teacher attrition, or retention. Teacher attrition causes 2.2 billion dollars lost annually, organizational instability in schools, and negative student outcomes (Ruble et al, 2023). Burnout, or work related emotional exhaustion is thought to be the primary culprit behind teacher attrition (Ruble et al, 2023). Special educators are teachers most likely to leave their jobs, with more than 50% of new teaching positions due to attrition, rather than growth in the field (Prather-Jones, 2011).

### ***Challenges of Special Educators***

There are several variables that lead to teachers not ‘fitting’ into their roles. One theoretical framework proposed by Billingsley considers three variables for teacher attrition (1993). These variables are 1)external factors 2) employment factors and 3)personal factors. External factors refer to societal issues, employment factors refer to working conditions, and personal factors refer to demographic variables. Billingsley believes that these variables are complex(1993). For example, special education teachers who were a part of a minority group reported higher rates of burnout (Prather-Jones, 2011). Additionally, special educators from rural settings had higher rates of burnout, maladaptive coping skills, and lower self efficacy than urban schools(Ruble et al, 2023). Special education teachers in rural areas have identified stressors, such as “role conflict, ambiguity of expectations, physical and emotional exhaustion, difficulty with behavioral management and difficulty forming relationships with students and coworkers” that have impacted their career (Ruble et al, 2023). The 3 variables (external factors, employment factors, and personal factors) have not received equal attention, with personal

variables “such as teacher motivations, interests, expectations, and personalities have gone virtually understudied in special education attrition and retention research” (Prather-Jones, 2011).

### ***Autism in Schools***

ASD diagnosis in school aged children is becoming more and more prevalent (Volker & Lopata, 2008). In 2008, 4.97% of children with disabilities served under IDEA were diagnosed with ASD. In 2018, that statistic has grown to 10.51% (Kushiyama, 2020). This growth in prevalence calls for the need for school personnel, such as educators and psychologists, to recognize the symptoms of ASDt (Volker & Lopata, 2008).. Autism is thought to be a heterogeneous disorder, with 15+ genes involved and marked variation of symptoms in individuals (Volker & Lopata, 2008). Autism has co-occurring disorders, such as epilepsy, with an estimated 8-42% occurrence rate, and intellectual disability, with an estimated 70% occurrence rate (Volker & Lopata, 2008). Additionally, several genetic disorders, such as fragile x syndrome have a high prevalence of features associated with autism (Volker & Lopata, 2008).

### **Center for Spectrum Services**

The Center for Spectrum Services is a New York day school program which services children ages 2-12 with autism. There are currently 2 school locations; 1 in Ellenville and 1 in Kingston. This study interviewed educators employed at the Kingston location. The school services students from over 30 school districts all over the Mid Hudson Valley, New York. Opened in 1976 under the name “The Children’s Annex”, the school opened its doors with intentions to serve children with developmental disabilities. Autism was much less understood in the 70s, however the founders of the school, Susan and Jamey, sought to make the school specialize in educating children with autism. The Center’s mission statement

“Is to evaluate individual needs, develop nurturing, therapeutic learning environments for our students, and foster professional growth for our staff. We believe that family, staff, and community collaboration is the cornerstone of our success.”

The Center’s core values are

A History of Excellence: we are regional leaders who have consistently developed programs that set the standard for quality person-centered services for over four decades.

Innovation: we explore and selectively utilize progressive, carefully-researched treatments and interventions.

Respect: we honor the diversity and embrace the unique perspective of our students, families, staff, board members, and volunteers.

Collaboration: we foster a creative approach to teamwork throughout our organization.

Integrity: we promote fairness, sincerity and honesty through ethical principles.

This location was chosen for qualitative research due to my long time employment at the Center.

### **Qualitative Psychological Research**

Essentially, research on the lived experience of special educators is sparse. Qualitative methods in psychology as an emergent field concerned with “accessing the subjective dimension of human experience in order to better understand what motivates people and to make sense of their actions” (Willig, 2019). Currently, the need to understand teacher perspectives is critical, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic (Ruble et al, 2023). This study is concerned with the experiences of professionals working with children on the autism spectrum. A qualitative approach allows for participants “to be experts in their own lives” (Silverstein & Auerbach, 2008). Working at Center for Spectrum Services for a year has given me the opportunity to build

rapport with these participants, so I feel that my data will best be captured through a qualitative methodology.

Qualitative psychological research is ‘research’ in that it is the process of a “systematic approach to gathering and scrutinizing information in the search for new knowledge”(Willig, 2019). It is unique in that it is an epistemological approach wholly separate from traditional quantitative methods (Willig, 2019). Qualitative researchers are often critical of positivist perspectives that many quantitative researchers evoke (Willig, 2019). Positivists posit that “the external world determines absolutely the one and only correct view that can be taken of it, independent of the process or circumstances of viewing” (Kirk & Miller, 1986). Therefore, capturing ‘reality’ takes on a static, single truth origin. Conversely, qualitative researchers often follow a constructivist epistemology (Willig, 2019). Constructivists argue that “every attempt to describe something always involves choices about what to focus on and how to represent it” (Willig, 2019). Essentially, qualitative researchers believe that ‘reality’ is constructed by perception. Therefore, many qualitative psychology researchers acknowledge that multiple perspectives exist, and argue that these multiple perspectives serve to enrich understanding of any given psychological phenomenon (Willig, 2019).

This current study follows a phenomenological approach to qualitative research. Phenomenological qualitative research “is concerned with gaining access to research participants’ subjective experiences and seeing the world through their eyes” (Willig, 2019). In essence, this study is concerned with the subjective experiences of this cohort of special educators. This research especially seems apt for the current study, since I believe that autism is such a heterogeneous disorder, that it is best understood through experience. This study

investigates the roles which comprise a special educator, which is not something I find can be quantitatively measured.

Like most qualitative research, this will be an inductive process. Inductive research takes on a “bottom up” approach, in which the researcher captures data “that can be mined for relevant categories of meaning to shed light on” the relevant topic (Willig, 2019). This is in contrast to a reductive quantitative methodologies, which first poses a hypothesis, tests the hypothesis, and then yields results. In this study, this data is generated from semi-structured interviews. My starting point is the lived experience of the educators, then I as a researcher, generate a thematic analysis. This thematic analysis should have a thick description, which is defined as data which “presents detail, context, emotion, and the web of social relationships that join persons to another” (Denzin, 1989).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Six ( $n=6$ ) employees of the Center for Spectrum Services were convenience sampled to participate in a 30-45 minute interviews which investigated their roles, relationships, and teaching practices (see appendix). Participants were chosen based on preexisting rapport with me (the researcher). Prior to data collection, I received approval for this research from the program coordinator (see appendix). Participants were first recruited in person then later emailed a detailed explanation of what the interview would entail (See appendix). Participants were compensated for their time with a 20\$ gift card from either Dunkin or Amazon after all interviews were completed (See appendix).



Four participants were special educators ( $n=4$ ) and 2 participants were psychologists ( $n=2$ ). All participants held a Masters degree in their field of study and 1 participant had a PhD. Educators had a mean of 9.17 ( $x=9.17$ ) years employed at their current position. Participant demographics in table 1.

Educators	Highest degree earned	Ages of current CSS students	No. of yrs. in current position
Educator 1	Master's in Special education	6-8 yrs.	7 yrs.
Educator 2	Master's in Special Education	7-11 yrs.	8 yrs.
Educator 3	Master's in School Psychology	2-12 yrs.	4 yrs.
Educator 4	PhD in Clinical Psychology	2-12 yrs.	17 yrs.
Educator 5	Master's in Special Education	4-5 yrs.	2 yrs.
Educator 6	Master's in Special Education	8-12	17 yrs.

**Table 1.**

### **Data collection**

Interviews took place in a quiet setting of the participants choosing. Three interviews were held in the library of the Center for Spectrum Services, 1 interview took place in the service provider's office, 1 interview took place in a teacher's classroom, and 1 interview took place in a local cafe. Interview length ranged from 16-43 minutes, with the mean interview duration being 29 minutes ( $x=29$ ). 4 of the interviews were completed with just the interviewer and participant in the room. 1 interview took place in public and 1 interview took place in the educator's

classroom, with teacher's aides present. Interviews were first audio recorded, transcribed by software transcribe.wreally, and edited by me. Editing of transcriptions entailed correcting any errors which were made by the transcription software. These errors were made when the software misheard certain words, or assigned speaker 1 or speaker 2 titles to wrong correspondents.

Participants were asked about their roles, relationships, teaching practices, and experiences with working with individuals on the spectrum. My questions were arranged within 4 categories, which were "background" "pedagogy" "traits" and "roles" (See appendix). A majority of my questions were novel, but some questions were adapted from Prather-Jones 2011 study which investigated "the reasons that experienced teachers of students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders give for remaining in the field" (Prather-Jones, 2011) (see appendix) .

### ***Researcher reflexivity***

My research reflexivity was taken into consideration with the participants. I am currently employed at The Center for Spectrum Services, and often have to work under the teachers and service providers interviewed. As a researcher, I did not feel like I held power in relation to the participants. I likewise did not worry about any negative effects this research might have on my job at The Center. In fact, I felt these interviews allowed me a unique opportunity to know more about my colleagues in depth. In terms of disclosure, all participants seemed extremely open to sharing about their experiences. Participants were ensured confidentiality (see appendix), although that did not seem like a large concern for most participants.

My position as a colleague to my participants did influence my analysis. I convenience sampled from educators who I have enjoyed working with. I also have had a positive work experience at

The Center. This may have caused my data analysis to have a more positive spin than other similar qualitative studies on the lived experiences of special educators.

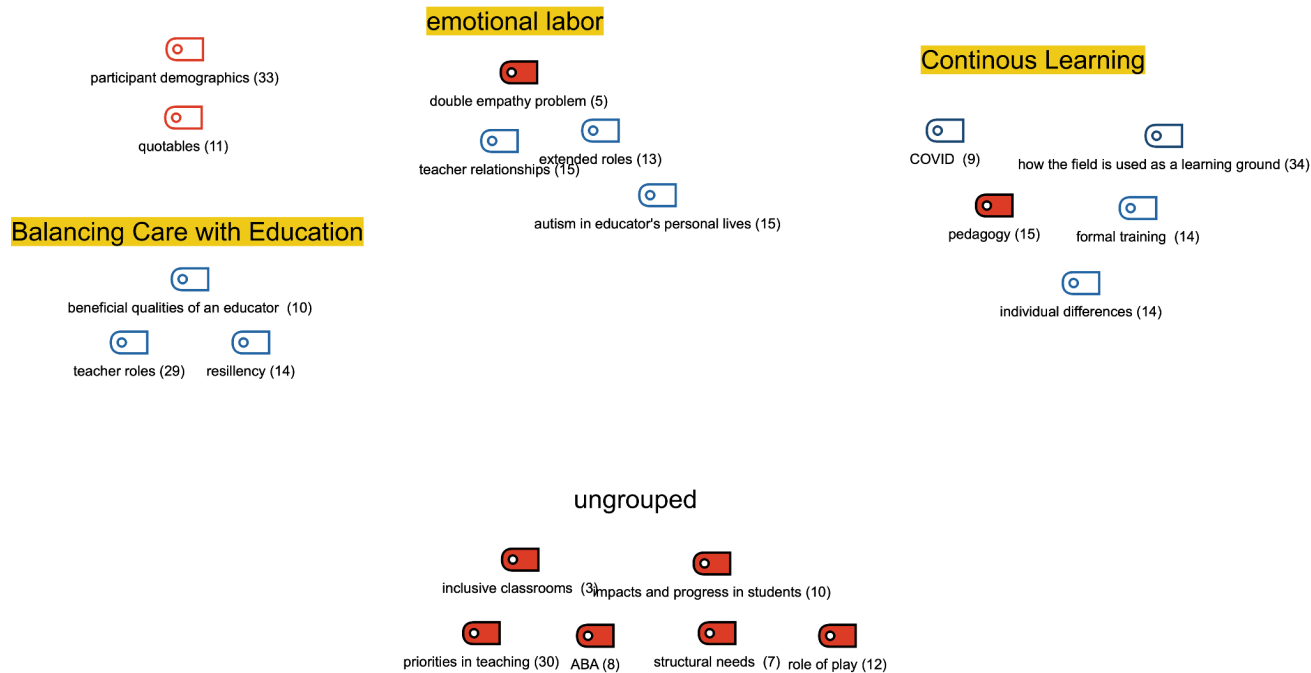
### **Data Analysis**

Since this research operated through an exploratory framework, grounded theory was utilized. Grounded theory is a methodology which “develops midrange theory through constant comparative analysis to identify concepts, categories, and relationships between them” (Oktay et al, 2013). Therefore, analysis is an ongoing process, until a model is completed which best fits the data.

Transcriptions were imported into qualitative coding software MAXQDA 2022. Prior to this research, I had brief experience with this software in a previous qualitative methods course. Coding in qualitative research is the process of assigning labels to data in order to better organize codes into greater themes. I approached coding through an inductive lens, first reading the transcripts and generating codes from the data. 20 codes were generated. From these codes, three themes emerged, which were 1) continuous learning 2) expending emotional labor 3) balancing care and education. 6 codes were determined to not fit into this data analysis, 2 codes were used to track participant demographics and quotes I would use in my final paper (See figure 1).

I determined that these themes ‘best fit’ my data, due to their ability to answer the question: “What makes a special educator?” and their ability to be supported by my transcription data. By utilizing a “bottom up” approach, I prioritized looking at what the data could be organized into, rather than how my data would best fit in a predetermined framework. Each transcription was reread at least 3 times. Coding systems constantly evolved until I arrived at my three final themes.

Codes that were unfit for the three themes were color coded red, and codes which did not fit a theme, but would be utilized in my paper were outlined orange (See figure 1). Codes in the ‘ungrouped’ segment did not ‘fit’ into any theme, but also did not ‘fit’ into a theme of their own. The numbers in parentheses indicate the amount of segments that were coded. For example, the code “double empathy problem” (5) was coded red, because not all participants had segments. Only 5 sentences from the 6 transcriptions were coded “double empathy problem”. Therefore, I did not think it was suitable to be included in the final thematic analysis.



**Figure 1**

## Results

My qualitative analysis produced 3 themes, continuous learning, expending emotional labor, and balancing care with education (see figure 2). Below I described the definitions of the themes, what coded segments made up the theme, and appropriate quotes which fit the theme.

### Continuous Learning

*“I want, for them... to feel the joy of being a child. A real child, and the rest, we’ll figure out.” (transcript one , p. 12)*

The theme 'continuous learning' captured the evolving teaching styles that special educators employ to navigate the challenges of working with students with autism. This theme arose out of educators indicating that much of their job consisted of learning on the go. Children with autism have so many individual needs that it is impossible to prepare educators in a formal setting for their jobs. Universities can teach basics, but once in the field, educators must be present to the current needs of the classroom. This theme answers my research question “what roles do special educators take on”, by stating that to be an educator is to be learning constantly in order to adequately teach their students. Segments under this theme were coded with 4 titles, which were “Field as a learning ground”, “COVID challenges”, “Individual differences” and “formal training”.

Seventy-one coded segments were generated to support this theme. These coded segments supported the theme of continuous learning by demonstrating how the school or ‘the field’ was a source of generating knowledge, and that the role of an educator is a practice of consistent adaptation. Although I did not have any questions which asked about COVID-19, many educators discussed how distance learning brought on by COVID-19 quarantine required them to develop new skills to best support their students through Zoom. Segments coded under individual differences captured how learning about the diverse needs and developmental sequences of students is a practice of continual learning. Lastly, coded segments under “formal training” captured what educators learned in formal settings, such as university or Center provided trainings and how those trainings were tailored to best fit their students’ needs.

While formal training was helpful, many things simply needed to be experienced to be understood. Educators mentioned that “trial and error” and “learning everyday” helped them feel more comfortable in their roles as an educator. Educator 2 mentioned that “theory is great but ...you really need that hands-on experience.” (transcript two, p. 2). Educator 3 explained that it wasn’t that her university left her unprepared, rather that some things were better understood “through just experiencing it.” The students that she works with range from ages 2-12. She explained that some of her students have low support needs and others are “severely intellectually disabled”. She learned how to best provide therapy for a wide variety of differences by asking questions to her colleague who has been in the field longer. The individual differences of each student expose educators to an array of teaching styles.

Students are so different from each other; there cannot be standardized training that will suit *all* students. Educator 6 mentioned that staff development days were helpful in that she could “go to the [school provided training]...and tweak the trainings to fit each child.” (transcription 6, p. 3). A feature of autism “lack of social interest or unusual social interactions, odd play patterns, unusual communication patterns, and rigid adherence to routines and repetitive behaviors” (5th ed.; DSM–5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These developmental patterns are highly individualized to each student. Educator 1 believed that in order for educators to be effective at their jobs, they must know who their students are as a person. She works through this by thinking about a series of questions, such as “What's important to them? Where are they at any given day? What's happening in their lives?” She also relies on relationships with the students’ families as it helps her better understand what the support networks of the child look like outside of school.

The classroom is a fluid environment. New students are routinely introduced to new educators, which means educators are constantly learning the personalities and needs of new

children. The fluid classroom environment as well as the diverse developmental patterns present in ASD requires educators to constantly learn how to best teach to each students' experience on the spectrum. This brings on certain challenges, which require adaptation. Educator 3 discussed how she just started to have play therapy sessions with two students, instead of one. This was difficult as "you're trying to teach both of them different skills and they both have different needs. (transcript three, p. 21)". These challenges amplify when you consider a broader set of students, such as classrooms. Educator 5 stated "what works for one set of kids and one class" wouldn't necessarily work for another class, or even the same class in a month (transcript 5, p. 4). This is a practice of continual learning.

Some educators discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic changed the landscape of the classroom. When the classroom switched to virtual learning, Educator 6 changed her main learning goal from teaching independence to just getting her students "to...pay attention and focus." (transcription 6, p. 8). Educator 3 mentioned that the COVID-19 quarantine tasked her with thinking "outside the box" and having to be creative. (transcript three, p. 3) Educator 4 mentioned that "during covid, [she] learned more and more about [yoga] because [she] could do it with [students]" over zoom (transcript 3 p. 12) New skills, such as learning how to maintain student attention over zoom during a global pandemic is one major example of what sort of unexpected challenges educators must face in order to do their jobs effectively. While formal training may have prepared educators to deal with students' attention wandering, or teaching independence, no one was truly prepared for how the landscape dramatically changed due to COVID-19. Therefore, educators were tasked with constantly learning how to navigate the changes of the classroom. The major challenge indicated was the switch to remote learning.

Continuous learning is a necessary part of the job for these educators. In a setting with 10+ children, this requires educators to constantly learn the personalities, familial circumstances, and skills of each student. In addition to learning these baseline characteristics of students, they must also be prepared for the quickly changing interests and skills of students. COVID-19 demonstrated that the classroom can be affected by global events. These unexpected changes require educators to learn new skills, such as distance learning.

### Expending Emotional Labor

*“Little people feel big emotions.” (transcript three, p. 20)*

This theme reflects the more emotionally laborious tasks associated with being a special educator. Emotional labor is a term coined by sociologist Arlie Hochschild to describe the emotional work of managing feelings and moods in a professional capacity. In this context, I use it to describe the emotionally taxing job of ensuring students and self are not overwhelmed, overstimulated, or overtired. 43 coded segments supported this theme and were organized in 3 codes, which were “Teacher Relationships”, “Autism in Educators’ Personal Lives”, and “Extended Roles”. This theme answers my research question of “what roles do special educators take on?” by capturing the ways in which emotional work is integral to being an educator.

Educators indicated that a large part of their job requires them to build “trusting relationships” with their students. Educators felt very strongly about their student relationships, with many tearing up when recalling a former student. Educator 3 described the emotionally glum process of ending a therapeutic relationship with a student. She said

“there's always... a goodbye process, which usually I'll say we have three more sessions together, two more sessions... and it's highlighting [that] “we're not going to see each other anymore, but you've made so much progress since I've seen you. You're going to do



great going into next year.” You can make them like a little card that they can keep but I always had to say.. goodbye, you know [in a school district] because I couldn't promise that I would see them again... and more than likely I wouldn't... and it was hard, that was hard.” (transcript three, p. 28).

After students have moved onto other schools or classrooms, some teachers stay in contact, but a majority of them mentioned that due to the ages of their students, communication is primarily through parent emails, which include updates and pictures. Unfortunately, many parents lose touch with their child's educators.

Educators expend so much emotional energy building intimacy with students, and when those relationships end, it is incredibly difficult for the educator. These educators benefit greatly from working in an environment where they can see students' progress even when they no longer work with them. Educator 3 mentioned that she preferred working at The Center as opposed to District because she can see how students are doing even when they're no longer her students. In school districts, children move more frequently to different schools as their educational journey progresses. Educator 2 also mentioned that he gets updates about former students' progress if they stay at The Center.

Many educators have connections to those with intellectual disability (ID) or autism in their personal lives. Educator 6 attributes her older brother with ID as the reason she decided to enter the field. Educator 4 explained just how intertwined her personal life and her work at The Center are. She was introduced to The Center by a social worker who suggested that her son get an evaluation for autism. The same day her son was diagnosed with autism, she was offered a job as a psychologist at The Center..She said “When I first started [at The Center], I went to the parent group, I facilitated the parent group, and I...it's hard to be a parent of someone with

special needs so I can relate [to parents]”. Through her work, she deepened her understanding of ASD. Her job at The Center “helped [her] understand, but also help[ed] [her] advocate” for her son (transcript 4, p. 15 - 16) Educator 6 discussed how her work at the Center helped her identify when her friends or family are “having a sensory overload. Or when someone needs a break” (transcription 6, p. 16).

Educators often take on extended responsibilities, and often, those responsibilities have emotional attachments. Educator 1 says “I try to be very attuned to my kiddos. Even my [university students] at night, if they text me and just say “this is what I'm dealing with right now. I don't know if I can get this paper in tonight.”...if you're in trauma, if you're in a situation [where] we can't do our best work....why would we require that of our students?” (transcript one , p. 6). Educator 1 needs to open herself up emotionally in order to garner trust with her students and also empathize with their circumstances.

This relationship building can translate to extending personal funds to accommodate students' interests. Educator 3 talked about how sometimes it is a struggle to not use her own money to provide toys to her individual students. While she gets a budget every semester, she still occasionally purchases things she knows her students would like while out shopping. This inclination towards spending personal money for work related purposes demonstrates just how blurred the line is between simply educating students and building relationships with children. Educator 3 discussed how working with one student created a special bond.

I worked with him since he was like 4 or 3...and he always...he's such a sweet, empathetic, little boy, you can tell he's so sensitive but he would engage in aggressive behaviors because he couldn't communicate... but we had a special relationship to where I was able to help teach him how to use the iPad. And now, he's proficient with it and that

was one of the most rewarding things I've ever done, because he's still using it to this day....I could cry thinking about him. He comes to see me and his way of hugging me is putting his head against mine. It's just the sweetest. He melts me! (transcript three, p. 27)

While it is great that educators care so much about their students, it also means that educators must ensure they have time to check in with themselves. Emotional burnout, or “emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment” due to “chronic work related stress” is increasingly becoming a recognized issue within the field of education (Ruble et al, 2023). This sample of educators indicated that although they found their job rewarding, they recognized that it can take a toll on their emotional wellbeing. Educator 3 mentioned that her work is “always rewarding [but] some days could be exhausting (transcript three, p. 24)”. This theme highlights the dynamic roles that educators play in their students’ lives. While it is a job with many rewards, it is a job which taps into educators’ emotional reserves. Therefore, much care has to be put into taking care of oneself.

#### Balancing Care with Education

*“learning how to be compassionate while still at the same time, being a teacher.” (transcription 6, p. 4)*

This theme discusses the negotiation between being a caretaker and educator. Caretaking in this context refers to both the act of taking care of others, but also of self. Segments in this theme are coded under ‘beneficial qualities of an educator’ ‘teacher roles’ and ‘resilience’. This theme is defined explicitly by the act of balancing. Since educators are constantly moving through so many roles, such as being constant learners and emotionally available, this theme captures the ways in which balance is established.

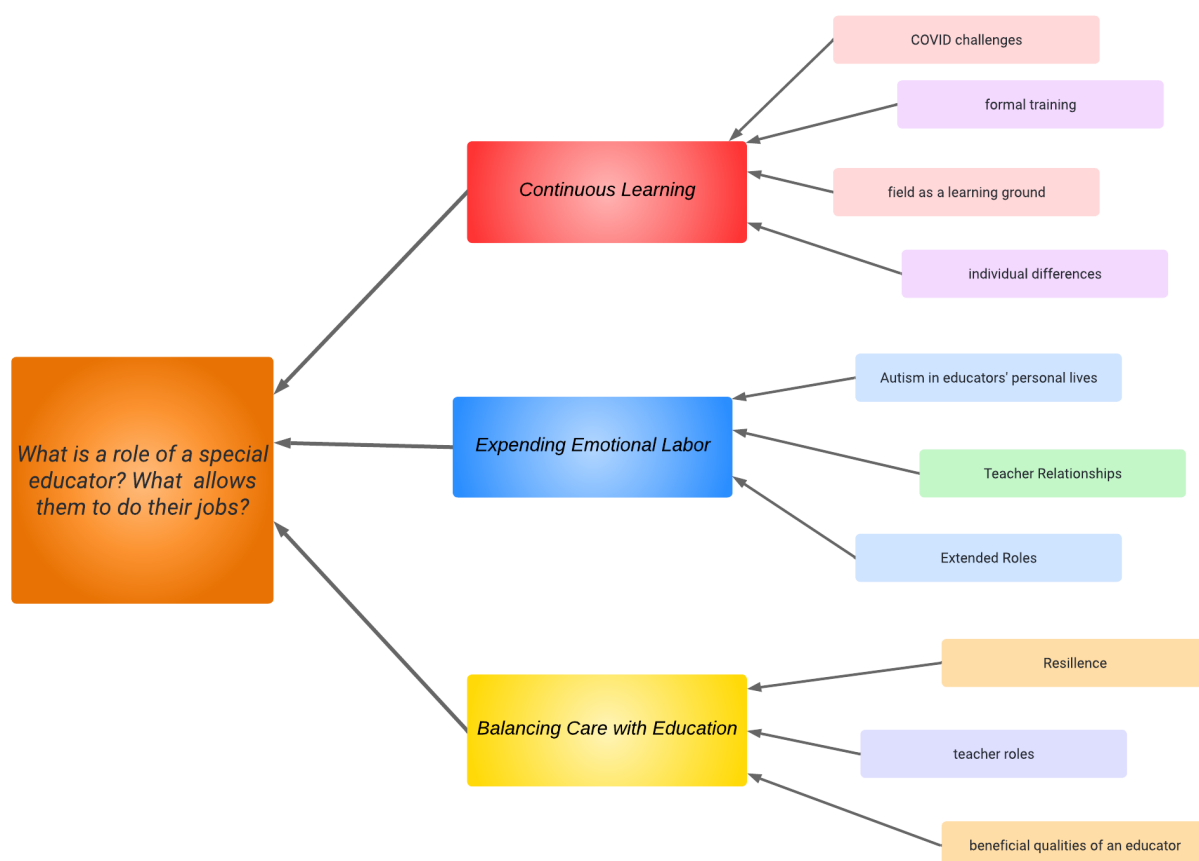
When a student has a difficult behavioral day, hitting, biting, or verbal aggression may occur. Educators must ensure they have space to healthily release tension and never take the negative actions of their students personally. Educator 6 stated that she accepts that a behavior occurred “And the next day, it's a new day...you have to let that go” (transcription 6, p. 12). In addition to coping with student behaviors, educators also needed coping skills to deal with not meeting teaching goals. Educator 6 discussed how she copes with a student failing to meet specific learning goals. She said “it's not a failure on yourself that a child didn't make it, it's just that, you know, you had greater expectations than what the child was able to get to and to just, you know, understand that not every child is going to learn and act the same way” (transcription 6, p. 11). This is a particularly healthy way of separating personal worth from job performance.

Educators indicated that many skills of self regulation they use in their personal life, they also teach their students. Educator 2 says

“I've used like mindfulness apps with my students. I try to do breathing activities with my students, try to get them to read and look at stories and pictures and, you know, find themselves in that world or whatever. I like to do exercise breaks, with the kids and have them walk and things like that. So try to do all the same things that I would do.”“(transcript two, p. 8).

This provides an outlet in a school setting not only for students but for educators as well. Both the student and the educator receive the therapeutic benefits of whatever self regulation skills are being practiced. It also bridges the gap between student and educator. Educators can empathize with their students struggling emotionally, recognize distress they may feel in their own personal lives, and implement techniques which will ideally benefit their students.

All educators in this study indicated that they had established self care practices. Self care routines are a crucial part of reducing work related burnout, with teachers who have reported poor or no coping skills having the highest rates of burnout (Ruble et al, 2023). Self care routines reported by these groups of educators included meditation, exercise, reading, or playing games. This data shows that this job is one which requires educators to take care of themselves when off the clock. By building strong coping mechanisms, educators can improve their health and decrease chances of work related burnout.



**Figure 2.**

## Discussion

This qualitative study investigated the roles that special educators undertake to serve their students with autism. ASD is a heterogeneous condition in which no case presents exactly the same. Educators face a unique challenge in that autism researchers have yet to establish a comprehensive theory on autism (Vivanti & Messinger, 2021). With no comprehensive theory on autism, there is no standard course of treatment. Treatment approaches have varied over the decades, with societal views guiding “the work of clinicians, researchers, and policymakers across different eras” (Vivanti & Messinger, 2021). Due to decades of advocacy for students with disabilities, schools are a crucial element in providing a “continuum of services that help with early identification, risk reduction, and prevention” (Eckert et al, 2017). One additional challenge which reduces effectiveness in educators providing the best services to their students is teacher attrition (Ruble et al, 2023). Teacher attrition destabilizes schools, reduces teacher quality, and negatively impacts student performance (Ruble et al, 2023). Unique challenges, such as reduced personal accomplishment, role ambiguity, and emotional exhaustion all play a part in teacher attrition ( Eckert et al, 2017;Ruble et al, 2023). It becomes crucial to understand the perspectives of educators in order to maintain stability in the field and improve student performance.

Throughout the course of 6 semi-structured interviews with special educators in a small school in the Hudson Valley, a vivid image has been portrayed about the ways in which they conceptualize their roles, as well as maintain stability in their roles. 3 themes were generated from these interviews, which were continuous learning, expending emotional labor, and balancing care with education. These themes adequately respond to the broad question of “what multifaceted roles do educators have?” In this discussion, I hope to contextualize the data provided by these 6 educators within historical elements in special education and psychological

understanding of ASD. In painting a broader picture on where educators are situated in the lives of their students, I will use Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Ecological systems theory posits that there is a bidirectional relationship between societal structures and individuals within the structure (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

There are 5 systems which Bronfenbrenner names as the ecological system. These are microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Bronfenbrenner conceptualized these systems to be "nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian Dolls" (Bronfenbrenner, 1971). These systems are often represented as concentric circles (see figure 3). Each system is to be understood as having bidirectional influence. Therefore, the microsystem influences the mesosystem and the mesosystem influences the microsystem, and so on. At the center of a system is a developing individual, in the context of this research, students on the spectrum are at the center of this ecological system.

Microsystems are "a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person" (Bronfenbrenner, 1971). Such environments include classrooms, daycares, and homes. Teachers, family members, and peers all 'live' within a child's microsystem.

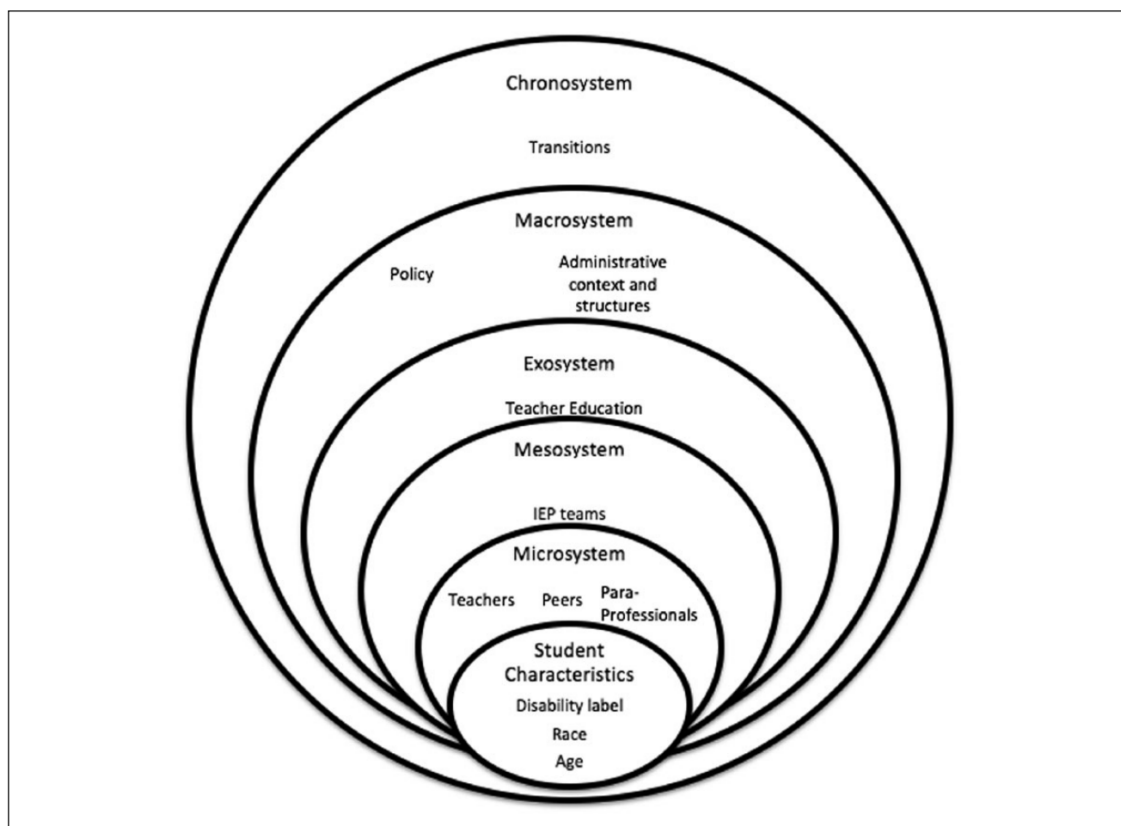
The mesosystem "comprises the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates" (Bronfenbrenner, 1971). A mesosystem can also be thought of as a "system of microsystems" (Bronfenbrenner, 1971). The mesosystem produces questions, such as "what types of interconnections are possible?" (Bronfenbrenner, 1971). In the scope of this research, this system should contextualize what interconnections there are in a child's life between school and home.

An exosystem is defined as “one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by what happens in the setting containing the developing person” (Bronfenbrenner, 1971). Essentially, this system can be thought of as indirect social structures which affect a student’s environment. In the scope of this paper, this can be conceptualized as parental/teacher education and experiences.

A macrosystem is defined by “consistencies, in the form and content of lower-order systems (micro-, meso-, and exo-) that exist, or could exist, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies” (Bronfenbrenner, 1971). This system includes “formal policies, but more importantly, includes the relationship among policies, cultural beliefs, structures for opportunity and history” (Ruppar et al, 2017). In the context of this paper, the historical understanding around autism and disability ‘lives’ in the macrosystem. The societal beliefs around disability dictate policy and subsequently, educational opportunities for those with ASD.

Lastly, a chronosystem refers to changes over time, both historical changes and changes in the developing person over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).





**Figure 3 (Ruppar et al, 2017)**

*Context of this study*

If we are to conceptualize a child with autism as the starting point, or developing person within this systems theory, the micro-systems would comprise of the special education classroom, the home of the student, and any other regular activity, perhaps therapy or ABA sessions. The meso-system would be the interconnectedness between two or more microsystems, such as parent, therapist, educator collaborations which often make up IEP teams. The exo-system would be teacher education, the macro-system would be educational policies, and the chrono-system would be historical as well as developmental changes over time (Ruppar et al, 2017).

Special education teachers, situated in the micro-system of the student, “have the most direct influence over student access to general education content and contexts” (Rupper et al, 2016). Special educators' self efficacy is directly related to student outcome expectations (Rupper et al, 2016). When educators have higher expectations for their students, their students perform better (Rupper et al, 2016). This highlights the bidirectional relationship between students and educators. There must be an understanding, trust, or belief in a students' success to see positive results. Due to the heterogeneity of autism, special educators must adapt to the individual differences of the students which they serve. Meeting a goal should be situated in the understanding that the goalpost is ever shifting. The cohort of educators in this current study copes with this by adapting into continuous learning, emotionally investing in their work, and balancing self care with their responsibilities.

Ruppar et al claims that IEPs, or individualized education plans can be understood as a part of the meso-system for the child (2016). IEPs are teams which consist of several of the child's micro-systems. IEPs are a team made up of a child's educator, parents, psychologists, and other service providers. These teams are organized in order to generate a plan for a child's general education (Ruppar et al, 2017). This is a social process, in which service providers, educators, and parents “incorporate their own experiences and knowledge” into planning for a child's IEP (Ruppar et al, 2016). As educators in the current study have indicated, they often are faced with novel challenges. Understanding the IEP meeting as a social process further highlights this. IEPs are meant to accommodate the individual needs of a student, however, what any given student might need is based on the discretion of the service providers and educators. Therefore, collaboration, open communication, and flexibility are required in order to properly service a child.

Exosystems within the scope of this paper are teacher experiences and education (Ruppar et al, 2017). These experiences shape the social processes of the mesosystem, which subsequently affect student learning and outcomes. This is another demonstration of how important it is to research teacher experiences in order to understand what negatively and/or positively affects their ability to do their jobs.

Macrosystems are where the policies that dictate education 'live' (Ruppar et al, 2017). Parent led movements have paved the way for IDEA, which is a federal law that requires students with disabilities to receive free and appropriate education.

Lastly, chronosystems refer to time, or transitions. In the scope of this paper, this refers to transitory times, such as the transition between grades and/or schools. In the context of this paper, this system can be thought of as any transitional period which requires a (re)evaluation of IEPs.

## **Recommendations**

The themes which answered the questions: "what is a role of a special educator? What allows them to do their jobs?" were "continuous learning", "expending emotional labor", and "balancing care with education". There is a crisis in education with teacher attrition, or teachers leaving their jobs for other fields. The hope is by understanding teacher perspectives, we can also understand how to increase the likelihood of remaining in their field. I will organize my recommendations in this section by each theme.

First, the theme "continuous learning" indicated that the role of a special educator is to be in a constant state of learning. Formal training was mentioned as being helpful, but paled in comparison to fieldwork. My recommendation would be that special education programs

implement *more* fieldwork, and also emphasize skills which allow for future teachers to seamlessly adapt to the continuous changes in the classroom. This recommendation is tricky, in that autism is a heterogeneous disorder with no one standard course of ‘treatment’ or ‘management’ (Vivanti & Messinger, 2021). These educators indicated that they learned how to best adapt to continuous change or novel situations by asking senior colleagues what they would do in particular situations. This collaborative process between co workers indicates that any given work environment should encourage learning between colleagues.

The theme “expending emotional labor” captured that special educators had to invest emotional energy into forming trusting relationships with their students. This act of investing emotionally into their jobs can lead to a work day that is more personally taxing than other, less personal careers. This can also lead to work related burnout, or chronic exhaustion from work stress (Ruble et al, 2023). Fortunately, this cohort of educators all mentioned some sort of healthy self care practices. One educator also mentioned that her formal training in university stressed the importance of self care. Literature suggests that poor coping skills lead to higher rates of teacher attrition (Ruble et al, 2023). Work environments should prioritize educator health and safety. This can take on the form of self care workshops, or any other institutional way of incorporating change. The Center strives to have a 1:1 student to teacher ratio, which relieves stress for the lead educator. The 1-1 ratio is able to be achieved through the employment of many teacher’s aides. Schools struggling with attrition or retention should perhaps follow similar models, or strive for similar ratios.

Lastly, the theme of “balancing care with education” revealed that special educators in this cohort believed that their job required a negotiation of caring for self and others. Similar to the theme of emotional labor, this theme stresses that self care is imperative to being able educate

students. Similar to my previous recommendation, I would recommend self care practices, such as knowing your emotional limit.

### **Limitations**

This current study had a number of limitations. First, the amount of participants ( $n=6$ ) who participated in interviews is on the smaller side of comparable qualitative studies, such as Prather-Jones, 2011 which investigated special educators through a similar methodology with 12 participants ( $n=12$ ), as well as Kim et al., who interviewed 24 teachers ( $n=24$ ) post COVID. A benefit of a larger participant pool is a richer data set. One goal in qualitative research is reaching a point of ‘saturation’ or “when the addition of new data no longer appears to generate new understandings in the analysis” (Levitt, 2021). I don’t think I reached ‘saturation’ due to my limited sample.

This study has a relatively homogenous sample of participants. The Center has a broad array of service providers, such as occupational therapists, speech therapists, psychologists, behavior analysts, and physical therapists. While all these ‘roles’ are relatively distinct, I think the addition of these professionals would paint a more descriptive analysis of the ‘ecology’ of educators that ‘live’ in the microsystem of a student in The Center. I purposely labeled the two psychologists included in this study as ‘educators’ because I wanted to highlight the similarities of a special education teacher and a service provider. Both these roles are dynamic, have significant overlap, and more importantly, teach children on the spectrum critical skills. I wasn’t able to interview more service providers, due to many of them not being directly employed by The Center. Unlike psychologists and special education teachers, many service providers (speech therapists, etc), are employed through an independent agency which The Center subsequently

contracts. This made gaining service providers' consent more difficult, as it would have to go through a 3rd party (independent agency).

In addition to being homogenous in job titles, this sample of educators was relatively homogenous in race and gender. All participants were white, and 5 out of the 6 participants were females. Research on minorities in education is sparse.

Another limitation of this study is a lack of mixed methods. While mixed methods, or the incorporation of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, is not required to generate data-rich results, I still think it would be interesting to investigate quantitative measures, such as personality testing, as it relates to the qualitative interviews. This study utilized semi-structured interviews to produce a thematic analysis. If I had more time and resources, I would have loved to host a focus group with my participants, asking whether or not the themes I generated fit into what they would conceptualize their roles as.

### **Further Research**

The need to understand teacher perspectives is still a pressing issue. Qualitative research is so great in that results are subjective. This study can be replicated with other samples of special educators (or even the same sample of special educators), yet produce vastly different results. I am a big proponent of qualitative research, due to the personalized, subjective nature of it. Creative partnership, or the practice of partnering with different organizations to create interdisciplinary results was something introduced to me by Eckert et al, in which a rural Hawaii school district partnered with various nonprofit organizations in order to “develop and implement a comprehensive array of interdisciplinary school-based programs and services to support the social and emotional well-being of students, families, and community” (2017).

I believe there to be great potential for qualitative psychological research on educators by utilizing a creative partnership. That is, I'm visualizing a university-school partnership in which researchers are contributing to building a better school, and educators are contributing to a body of knowledge. This project was in many ways very organic for me. I was already employed at the Center. When my participants mentioned students, I knew who they were referring to. I was seeking to understand educators more, but I had a foundational understanding of what their day-to-day entailed. Qualitative research is a fantastic methodology for creative partnership. One qualitative methodology, called participatory action research (PAR)

“is a particular example of how researchers and participants become full collaborators in creating action projects that are designed to meet specific needs. PAR provides opportunities for researchers and participants to co-construct knowledge, unsettling the power dynamics between outside experts and local community insiders” (Silverstein & Auerbach, 2009).

Silverstein & Auerbach give an example of a PAR project where

“[researchers] worked with a group of parents whose children had been diagnosed with emotional problems and placed in the most restrictive educational environments (Ditrino & Silverstein, 2006). Through PAR, the parents developed and implemented an action plan to improve family-school relationships at the local, community, and state levels” (Silverstein & Auerbach, 2009).

Further research on teacher perspectives should also yield tangible, actionable results which teachers agree would make their jobs easier.

## Conclusion

This qualitative study investigated what roles educators take on. Themes “continuous learning”, “expending emotional labor”, and “balancing care with education” were generated from 6 semi-structured interviews with educators employed at the Center for Spectrum Services, an autism school servicing the mid-hudson valley. In addition to qualitative research, this thesis contains a synopsis of special education, autism, and the subsequent challenges associated with understanding the heterogeneity of ASD. Lastly, I aimed to contextualize all the content of this thesis into a Bronfenbrenner ecological systems theoretical framework.

Presently, ASD is understood as a disorder which causes social difficulties, stereotyped, repetitive behaviors and interests (DSM 5). This understanding of ASD has changed radically over the last 100 years. First understood as childhood onset schizophrenia, now it is understood as a neurodevelopmental disorder with some genetic basis. The development of special education comes after arduous legal movements led by parents, such as *Brown v Board*, *Mills v Board of Education District of Columbia*, which led to the subsequent development of The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). IDEA made it legally required for children with disabilities to receive free and appropriate education.

Special education is a critical component of the management of ASD. Special education provides the foundation for good citizenship, and provides crucial early intervention, and mental health services to children in need. 75% of children with lifelong mental disorders receive services in schools. School based mental health services relieve social and economic burdens (Greenberg et al, 2005; Thurlow and Johnson, 2011). Special educators are important actors in ensuring children with disabilities receive appropriate services. Unfortunately, the United States is facing a current crisis of teacher attrition. Special educators are the subset of teachers most



likely to leave their jobs. Therefore, research on special educators' perspectives on their roles is crucial to reducing attrition. Attrition destabilizes schools and negatively impacts student performance.

Six special educators ( $n=6$ ) at The Center for Spectrum Services were convenience sampled to participate in 20-45 minute semi structured interviews. These interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Once transcribed, transcripts were imported into a qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA. Transcriptions were read and re-read then coded. Codes were subsequently sorted into 3 themes, which were continuous learning, expending emotional labor, and balancing care with education.

When conceptualized in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model, special educators are understood to be situated in the 'microsystem' of the student. Special educators' relationships to the students that they teach is important to the development of the child.

Recommendations I have for reducing teacher attrition, are increasing hands-on-learning for students studying to be special educators, and maintaining a workspace which encourages colleague collaboration. As individuals, special educators should have consistent self care practices, and firm work-life balance.

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## Appendix

**IRB approval****Bard College**

Institutional Review Board

Date: 6/10/2023

To: Sydney Darling

Cc: Sarah Dunphy-Lelii; Nazir Nazari

From: Ziad M. Abu-Rish, IRB Chair

Re: What Makes a Special Educator? A Qualitative study investigating special educators pedagogy, trait characteristics and student relationships

**DECISION: APPROVED**

Dear Sydney Darling:

The Bard Institutional Review Board reviewed the revisions to your proposal. Your proposal is approved through June 10, 2024. Your case number is 2023JUN10-DAR.

Please notify the IRB if your methodology changes or unexpected events arise.

We wish you the best of luck with your research.



Ziad M. Abu-Rish, Ph.D.

IRB Chair

Associate Professor of Human Rights and Middle Eastern Studies

Bard College

[zaburish@bard.edu](mailto:zaburish@bard.edu)



**In person recruitment:**

I would like to invite you to participate in my senior research project. As you may know, I am a senior at Bard College completing a psychology degree. As part of my graduation requirement I must complete a senior research project. I am conducting interviews over the summer session at Center for Spectrum Services. These interviews will be 45-60 minutes and will ask questions about your training, pedagogical approaches with students, and personality characteristics. Your participation will be compensated with a 20 dollar gift card of either Dunkin' or Amazon after all interviews have concluded. Interviews will take place in either (1) Stevenson Library at Bard College, (2) the library at the Center for Spectrum Services, (3) or in any other quiet space you prefer to meet. If you are interested, I will email details to your work account.

**Email follow up to interested participants:**

Thank you for your interest in my 2023 summer research project. My study uses a qualitative research approach to examine the experiences of special educators/psychologists/speech therapists/physical therapists/occupational therapists employed at the Center For Spectrum Services. Interviews will be around 45-60 minutes and will ask questions about your training, pedagogical approaches with students, and personality characteristics. I can meet at your convenience after school hours either at (1) Bard College's Stevenson Library in a reserved room, (2) the Center for Spectrum Services library, (3) or a quiet place of your comfort.

Identifying information, such as your name and gender, will be removed from the final transcript. However, complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. With your permission, I will audio record our conversation for the purpose of note taking. As compensation for your participation, a 20 dollar gift card from either Dunkin' or Amazon will be delivered to you after all interviews have concluded.

Any questions or concerns you wish to ask me can be sent to my email [sd4953@bard.edu](mailto:sd4953@bard.edu) or my project faculty advisor, Sarah Dunphy-Lelii at [sdl@bard.edu](mailto:sdl@bard.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the chair of the Bard College Institutional Review Board at [irb@bard.edu](mailto:irb@bard.edu).

## Approval from school director:

Hi Mary Alice,

Thank you for meeting with me on April 15th about my senior research project. As part of Bard College's commitment to ethical research, all projects must undergo IRB approval. Could you please confirm that we went over my research questions for my Institutional Review Board by replying to this email?

Thanks,

Sydney

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**Sydney Darling** <SDarling@centerforspectrumservices.org>  
to me ▾

11:55AM (0 minutes ag

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**From:** Mary A. Millham <MMillham@centerforspectrumservices.org>  
**Sent:** Monday, May 1, 2023 11:33:22 AM  
**To:** Sydney Darling <SDarling@centerforspectrumservices.org>  
**Subject:** RE: Senior project research

Hi Sydney,

This is to confirm that we met on April 15<sup>th</sup> to discuss your senior research project and at that time, you reviewed your questions with me.

*Mary Alice Millham*

## Questions from Prather-Jones

**Table 2.** Interview Guide Questions

Category	Sample Questions
Background	<p>How long have you been teaching?</p> <p>How long have you been teaching students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders?</p> <p>How did you get into this field?</p> <p>What is your educational background (including degrees and certification)?</p> <p>Are you still in school/taking classes/other professional development?</p> <p>Describe your current position. Describe a typical day.</p> <p>What are your future career plans?</p>
External factors	<p>Do you feel your teacher preparation program adequately prepared you for your position?</p> <p>What aspects of it (as well as additional professional development opportunities) have been most beneficial?</p> <p>Do you feel that your position is valued by your school/community/society? Examples?</p>
Personality factors	<p>What do you like about teaching students with EBD?</p> <p>What are the challenges in teaching students with EBD? Examples?</p> <p>How do you overcome these challenges? Examples?</p> <p>Have you ever thought about changing careers? Examples?</p> <p>Many teachers leave this field; why do you stay? Why do you think other teachers leave this field?</p> <p>Do you know of someone who left? Why did they leave?</p> <p>What makes you an effective teacher for this group of students?</p> <p>Have you known other effective/ineffective teachers? What made them such?</p>
Employment factors	<p>Describe the work experiences you had prior to beginning to teach.</p> <p>How are you supported/not supported in your work?</p> <p>What does being supported mean to you? Examples?</p> <p>What, if any, aspects of your position can be overwhelming and/or stressful? Examples?</p>

Note: EBD = emotional and/or behavioral disorders.

## My adapted Semi-Structured Interview Questions

### Background:

Can you talk about your journey to becoming a [special educator/ speech pathologist/ physical therapist/ play therapist]

How many years have you been working in the sector of special education?

What is your educational background?

What age group do you teach?

Are you still in school? Taking classes for professional development?

What are your future plans?

### Pedagogy:

What aspects of your training help you interact with your students the most? Can you provide examples?

What were some unexpected skills you had to develop?

What life skills do you prioritize cultivating in your students?

How was the layout of your [classroom/ service room]determined?

How do you choose which toys enter your [classroom/service room]? How do you know when you 'retire' a toy?

What is the benefit of 'choice-time'?

### Traits:

In educational literature, there is some debate between if being a 'good' teacher is innate or a skill which can be cultivated. What is your opinion about being a 'good teacher'? Do you believe there to be something innate which teachers must possess?

What makes someone effective at working with children with developmental disorders?

What makes someone ineffective at working with children with developmental disorders?

After a particularly difficult day at work, are there any coping mechanisms or routines you regularly practice? If so, what are they? Are they skills that you teach your students?

### Roles:

How do you perceive your role in the lives of your students? Essentially, how do you 'fit' into their lives?

How does what you know/experience about autism intersect with other identities?

Can you recall any times you felt like you had a lasting impact with your student?

Examples?

Can you recall any times you wished you could have made more of an impact on students?

Do you maintain relationships with any of your former students? If so, what is that like?

**Debriefing statement:**

We have come to the end of our interview, and I thank you for your participation. My study uses a qualitative research approach to examine the experiences of special educators/ psychologists/ speech therapists/physical therapists/occupational therapists employed at the Center For Spectrum Services. I investigate pedagogy utilized in your teaching practice, your trait characteristics , and relationships you have built with your students. As compensation for your participation, a 20 dollar gift card from either Dunkin' or Amazon will be delivered to you after all interviews have concluded. Do you have any questions you would like answered now? Do you have subjects you felt that needed to be talked about? Any questions that I wished I asked you about? You can reach me at [sd4953@bard.edu](mailto:sd4953@bard.edu) and my faculty adviser, Sarah Dunphy-Lelii at [sdl@bard.edu](mailto:sdl@bard.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the chair of the Bard College Institutional Review Board at [irb@bard.edu](mailto:irb@bard.edu). You have a right to withdraw your interview from the study up to 2 weeks after today's date.