

**A Qualitative Study on the Effects of the Workload on Special Education Teachers in
Rural School Districts**

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Abstract

Special education teachers in rural school districts are responsible for teaching our most vulnerable students and carrying out the state requirements of each student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP), collecting data, collaborating with inside and outside school personnel, among other duties. The article presents a phenomenology study on stressors and ways three special education teachers currently teaching in a rural community school district deal with working in a rural special education setting. With coping strategies, administration support, and time to grasp their inner strength when working with students with disabilities, teachers can feel satisfied with their job. This qualitative study examined the research question, "What effects does the workload have on special education teachers in rural school districts?" The participants filled out a questionnaire based on their workload and the stress of their daily role as a special education teacher. There is a trend in schools finding it harder to fill special education positions. It is essential to explore if the workload is too overwhelming, and teachers are burnout, feeling emotionally exhausted.

Keywords: special education, workload, stress, burnout

The quality and effectiveness of a special education teacher's instruction for students with disabilities depend on the conditions in which they work (Bettini et al., 2016). Teaching, in general, can be a very challenging job. Research shows that special education teachers have higher stress levels than general education teachers. (Kebbi & Al-Hroub, 2018). Special education teachers have a wide variety of responsibilities, managing students' behavior, lesson planning, data collecting, and developing class instruction individually for each student (Kebbi & Al-Hroub, 2018). Besides, they need to communicate with parents, paraprofessionals, outside services, and general education teachers (Kebbi & Al-Hroub, 2018). Special education teachers spend more time working on paperwork involving Individual Education Plans (IEP) than time instructing the students (Lucido, 2013). Only 37% of a special education teacher's day is implementing academic and support instruction to their students (Vannest et al., 2011). Two-thirds of the day is taken up by other duties other than working with their students (Vannest et al., 2011). Special education teachers are writing IEPs, putting together behavior plans, and other documentation that provides information about the students academically and behaviorally (Anderson, 2017). When teaching in a rural school, special education teachers have to work with all types of disabilities in all kinds of settings (Zost, 2019). These settings can be in the general education classroom, small group or one-one in the resource room, or a self-contained environment with students and their paraprofessional.

Special education teachers in a rural community need to be even more flexible than other teachers (Zost, 2019). Due to funding and classroom size, rural special education teachers work with all types of disabilities (Zost, 2019). Unlike general education teachers, special education teachers are responsible for multiple age groups (Zost, 2019). It is not uncommon in a rural school district for special education teachers to be teaching students K-6 or 7-12 (Zost, 2019). A

special education teacher deals with the constraints on finding time to work with the students (Berry & Gravelle, 2018). Teachers felt their lack of time meeting each student's individual needs were a significant daily challenge (Berry & Gravelle, 2018). When teaching in both an inclusion and resource environment, 57% of the teachers felt emotionally exhausted (Williams & Dikes, 2015).

Impacts of teacher workload

Today's workload on special education teachers takes away the high quality and effectiveness of their instruction to their students with disabilities (Bettini et al., 2016). Emotional exhaustion is caused by the workload put on special education teachers (Cancio et al., 2018). When unable to manage the workload as a special education teacher, a study showed that teachers lack energy and find themselves not performing their responsibilities effectively (Cancio et al., 2018). Cancio and colleagues wanted to investigate why the decline of special education teachers is on the rise. Two hundred eleven special education teachers responded to a questionnaire regarding job satisfaction, feelings about the job, descriptions of their mental state- such as sleep and missing work, and coping with the stress (Cancio et al.,). To show validity, the researchers used exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis. 78% of the teachers expressed being tired because of work. 57% reported frustration, and 63% stated how they bring home work-related problems (Cancio et al.,). Lack of job performance satisfaction due to workload reported by 61% of the teachers (Cancio et al.,). Findings reveal that special education teachers feel tired, bring home their stressors, and feel their job performance is affected due to the workload. Further studies need looked into why teachers who still feel the stress of their job stay the course and continue to teach.

When teachers are not satisfied with their job responsibilities, student learning is affected (Stasio, Fiorilli, & Benevene, 2017). A terminology known to special education teachers is "burnout" (Williams & Dikes, 2015). Fatigue and frustration are brought on by feeling a lack of self-esteem (Parnell & Argis, 2019). A study done by Williams and Dikes (2019) on the implications of burnout among special education teachers indicated that 62% of teachers who spend 7 to 10 hours a week completing paperwork experienced depersonalization (D.P.). D.P. is when the Teacher's attitudes towards their job become negative, leaving the Teacher to feel compassion fatigue (Ziaian-Ghafari & Berg, 2019). Working with students with mild, moderate, or even severe disabilities can affect special education teachers. Special education teachers can develop what is known as compassion fatigue (Ziaian-Gharair & Berg, 2019). Compassion fatigue arises when special education teachers begin to feel tired both emotionally and physically when working with people with physical, emotional, or social circumstances, such as students with disabilities (Ziaian-Ghafari & Berg, 2019).

The workload on special education teachers is one reason why teachers are leaving the profession. The President of the Council of Exceptional Children (CEC) reported that 48 states show a lack of special education teachers (An Interview with CEC President Jennifer Lesh, Ph.D., 2020). In the last ten years, the number of special education teachers nationally has decreased by 17% (Harwin, 2018). Some consequences to why teachers are leaving their profession are due not only to the feelings of self-efficacy but also the abundance of paperwork and not enough time to manage their daily instructional plans for their students with disabilities (Cancio et al., 2018). Schools are now hiring "out of field" teachers to take on special education teachers' responsibilities due to the shortage (Williams & Dikes, 2015). Research shows that more pre-service teachers avoid rural special education jobs for higher pay, better facilities, and

more benefits (Williams & Dikes, 2015). Therefore, it is crucial to investigate how the workload of special education teachers affects their well-being. The need to provide quality education and the desire to work in a rural school district for students with disabilities needs to be addressed and further researched.

The top three teaching positions that states across the U.S. are seeing a significant shortage of qualified applicants are math, science, and special education (Sutcher et al., 2019). Special education positions are at the top of the list (Sutcher et al., 2019).

To address the shortage of special education teachers, researchers completed an extensive electronic search of four different academic databases (Brunsting et al., 2014). After collecting the articles, they focused on specific search terms such as emotional exhaustion, burnout, special education, and various types of disorders, such as autism, emotional disturbance. The results indicated a total of 147 articles. Researchers thoroughly read articles about quantitative burnout studies and special education teachers. All papers had to be peer-reviewed, published only from 1979 to 2013, and all studies performed in the U.S. (Brunsting et al., 2014). Completed was an analysis of the data using the Ecological Model findings of the extensive literature study. It stated that older, more experienced teachers show less burnout than novice teachers (Brunsting et al., 2014). This study's question is why our newer, novice teachers choose to leave the profession sooner than our veteran teachers. A special education teacher shortage will continue to rise if more veteran teachers retire, and there are no novice teachers to take over their positions. Future studies in developing a program working with both our novice and experienced teachers need to be addressed. With the demands of the workload, schools are pushing away our young special education teachers' future.

A study done in 2019 was conducted by Robinson and colleagues to further the understanding of why special education teachers are leaving their occupation (Robinson et al., 2019). Three hundred sixty-three participants were all special education teachers teaching in all three areas - elementary, middle, and high school classrooms across the United States in public schools (Robinson et al., 2019). There were 294 women and 64 men ranging from the ages of 20 - 39. Of those teachers, 36% of elementary teachers, 25 % of middle school teachers, and 36% high school teachers. Most of the teachers, over half, taught in a suburban setting (Robinson et al., 2019). Researchers conducted the study through an electronic survey. Data were analyzed using the Maslach burnout inventory (MBI-ES) (Robinson et al., 2019). MBI-ES is a psychological assessment in measuring the burnout of educators. The special education teachers answered 22 questions via email. The questions' categories were based on emotional fatigue, depersonalization, and growth (Robinson et al., 2019).

Based on the magnitude of the participants and the multivariate involved in the overall study, a Canonical correlation analysis using a *t-test* was done. The basic formula done for this type of quantitative research was $R = \sqrt{R_{yy} - 1 R_{yx} - 1 R_{xy}}$. A median correlation of 0.3 was used to determine the essential variables of burnout in the subcategories of emotional exhaustion (-0.067), depersonalization (-0,006), and personal accomplishments (0.024). The results for job satisfaction fall under the subcategories of leaving (-1.461), support (0.831), and professional development (0.93). Overall, the study indicated teachers' first choice when leaving their occupation is depersonalization or lack of personal growth in fulfilling their daily roles as a special education teacher (Robinson et al., 2019). The second reason for leaving is a lack of administration and staff support (Robinson et al., 2019). Several studies focused on what causes

burnout for special education teachers; further research needs to be completed to investigate why those teachers who stay the course can retire from special education.

Past Interventions

Workload. Describing a special education teacher's role is not easy (Pearson et al., 2015).

Special education teachers provide accommodations and modifications to help support their students with disabilities in a general education setting and implement interventions for all core subjects-reading, math, and Writing (Sindelar et al., 2014). The responsibilities do not stop there; they also have to ensure that they implement adaptive skills and social-emotional skills for their student with behavioral or emotional disabilities (Sindelar et al., 2014). When not working with the students, they are responsible for communicating with general education teachers, parents, paraprofessionals, administration, and outside services, such as an occupational therapist or speech pathologist (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010).

To further understand the relationship between special education teachers' benefits and challenges in rural settings, Berry and Gravelle conducted a study on the overall satisfaction of special education teachers in rural school districts. Two-hundred four special education teachers in 55 rural school districts took part in a survey (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). In their findings of what they liked best about teaching special education in a rural setting, 86% liked the small community atmosphere, allowing for building more relationships with parents and students outside of the school setting (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). Separate from the positive aspects of teaching special education in rural districts came the challenges to their instructional performance's overall satisfaction; 89% of the teachers commented on either being satisfied or strongly satisfied (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). Paperwork, lesson planning, and other non-instructional parts of the day made up 67% of the Teacher's dissatisfaction with their special

education teachers' role (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). 17% of those dissatisfied directly commented on how they felt they had to use their time outside of school to compensate for getting all non-instructional demands done (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). Over half of the teachers expressing dissatisfaction with their job due to the non-instructional parts of the day. The research tended to focus on satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their job. With such a large number of special education teachers feeling dissatisfied with the non-instructional parts, little studies are done on rural special education teachers and their time used during the day. Solutions to making the days more flexible and instructional driven instead of paperwork driven need to be addressed.

When describing if a special education teacher's workload is unmanageable, the only comparison can be that of a general education teacher. Bettini and colleagues studied the perception of beginning special education and general education elementary and middle school teachers concerning managing the workload, career goals, and emotional fatigue. They sent out the survey using Dillman's five-contact approach to urban special education teachers (SET) and general education teachers (GET) in the fall and the spring (Bettini et al., 2017). Participants in the study were sixty-one special education teachers and one hundred eighty-four general education teachers (Bettini et al., 2017). A two-way repeated-measures ANOVA analyzed the research on workload manageability. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was administered to answer questions based on emotional fatigue and career intentions. In their findings, based on the workload manageability, general education teachers were more likely to agree in the spring that their workload was manageable ($M=2.457$, $SD=1.208$ in fall; $M=2.803$, $SD=0.783$ in the spring) (Bettini et al., 2017). Special education teachers, however, disagreed with the statement, feeling that the workload was less manageable ($M=2.603$, $SD=1.059$ in fall; $M=2.534$, $SD=0.995$ in the spring; $F [1, 229] = 7.646$, $p = .006$) (Bettini et al., 2017).

As for the questions based on emotional fatigue and career intentions for special education teachers, emotional exhaustion was significant ($p = .050$), such that a 1 S.D. increase in fall workload manageability was associated with a .242 S.D. increase in spring career intentions (Bettini et al., 2017). Whereas for general education teachers, emotional exhaustion was $p = .000$, such that 1 S.D. increase in workload manageability was associated with a .563 S.D. increase in career intentions (Bettini et al., 2017).

In conclusion to the study's findings, Bettini and colleagues found that both elementary and middle school special education novice teachers found their workload less manageable than general education teachers. While this study offers evidence that the workload is a burden to novice teachers, it is not addressed for teachers in a rural setting. This leads to more studies in teachers' attitudes in rural districts regarding feeling overwhelmed due to workload manageability.

The impact of the workload on special education teachers affects instruction quality when working with the most vulnerable students, those with disabilities. One approach to help special education teachers cope with the challenges is Acceptance and Commitment Therapeutic (ACT) Interventions (Emery, 2010). The therapy from professionals allows the opportunity to alleviate the feelings of despair when special education teachers feel overwhelmed from their daily challenges of working with various students with different needs, paperwork, and other duties throughout the workday. The intervention focuses on accepting feelings and working through them through mindfulness (Emery, 2010). Regarding the characteristic of communicating within one's mind, using the "verbal" thinking by allowing to accept and understand that what is going on in life at work does not define one as a person, but it is a job. Mindfulness exercises or meditation allows one to be fully cognitive to their situations, such as an outburst all week from a

behavioral student(s) (Emery, 2010). Valued living is part of the therapy that gives way to finding worth or value in life. It opens the door to feeling whole again in your purpose for a special education teacher's demanding tasks.

Due to large caseloads, lack of resources to provide quality instruction, little support from administration, paperwork, and feeling overwhelmed, the Teacher feels stressed (Cancio et al., 2018). Leading to the implications of special education teachers want to their profession. To further investigate why special education teachers want to leave their profession, and if they were to stay, what would encourage them to do so, a questionnaire was sent out to special education teachers (Kaff, 2004). Three hundred forty-one special education teacher who worked with either emotional/behavioral disorders (E/BD), intellectual disorders (I.D.), learning disorders (L.D.), and interrelated (I.R.) participated in the study (Kaff, 2004). A systematic research procedure, content analysis, was used to analyze the data (Kaff, 2004). The results showed out of the three hundred forty-one participants, forty-five percent thought about leaving the field (Kaff, 2004). Out of those teachers that considered leaving the profession, 63% worked with E/BD students, 43% L.D., 37% M.R., and 36 I.R. Lack of support, student issues, and paperwork were three top reasons why the teachers were thinking of leaving (Kaff, 2004). Fifty-seven percent of the teachers felt unsupported in what they do as a special education teacher by the administration and other staff members (Kaff, 2004). Forty-eight percent felt other duties took over their core responsibilities of working with special needs students (Kaff, 2004). The overwhelming amount of paperwork was an issue for fifty-two percent of the teachers (Kaff, 2004).

In conclusion to the findings, the belief that providing instruction to students with disabilities is taken a backseat to other demands of the job that only administration can help

alleviate. With the lack of support, the teachers feel less valued and unable to keep up the paperwork demands. With an increase in special education teachers wanting to leave their profession, further studies into what changes have occurred over the last ten years. The roles of special education teachers are not just teaching our most vulnerable. Still, with an increase in alternate assessment portfolios, evidence-based research for instruction, and other duties provided by the administration, a change has occurred. Questioning the job title as a special education teacher, but an outsource for the school as a data collector, not a teacher.

Over time, the question arises of how special education teachers are affected by professional demands. A study done by Bozeyikli further investigated the outcome of the quality of life for special education teachers. Two hundred thirty-eight special education teachers participated in a survey to see if their job affected their overall quality of life concerning working with students with special needs (Bozgeyikli, 2018). One hundred sixty-six married and seventy-two were unmarried (Bozgeyikli, 2018). Two scales measured the survey's reliability, the Professional Quality of life scale (ProQOLS), and the New Psychological Needs Scale (NPNS) (Bozgeyikli, 2018). The ProQOLS measured the quality of life in being a special education teacher (Bozgeyikli, 2018). The choices from never to frequent were broken down into three sub-groups: burnout and fatigue, second satisfaction with their profession, and third levels of stress in particular situations at school using a Likert Scale (Bozgeyikli, 2018).

The researchers used the Pearson Correlation analysis with a $<.05$ statistical significances. These findings support the idea that teachers feel less satisfied with their jobs, more burnout, and developing compassion fatigue when taking the responsibilities as a special education teacher. Showing that as special education teachers begin to feel less in control and self-efficient in their jobs, the burnout rate increase by 37% (Bozgeyikli, 2018). Even more

revealing is that when the teachers start to avoid social interactions or relationships with others, they show compassion fatigue signs. Results of interlinear regression analysis on the prediction of compassion fatigue account for 35% of the variance in compassion fatigue and four psychological needs' sub-dimensions. When the characteristics relating to the independent variables are analyzed, the relationship needs were the negative predictor of compassion fatigue. Other sub-dimensions showed to be no significant predictors (Bozgeyikli, 2018). While other researchers have also looked into the correlation between compassion fatigue/burnout regarding special education teachers' quality of life, few studies show the job's long-term effect. More studies in the overall quality of life our special education teacher have had after retiring need to be addressed. Questioning their overall well-being of years of stress and the implications stress may have on one's health.

Theoretical Framework

Teachers go into the field of teaching to make a difference, create an atmosphere of learning, and provide a safe, happy environment for their students. Something that can get overlooked is that of a teacher's welfare. Special education teachers are more susceptible to stress or even burnout due to their profession. Stress and burnout can evolve from emotions of avoidance or no longer have interests in something. The Relational Frame Theory (RFT) is when emotions become distant (Vilardaga et al., 2012). In other words, after a long period of working in a position one may no longer manage, such as the student's needs, or never getting on top of the workload that goes along with those needs, beginning to shut down and isolate from others (Vilardaga et al.,2012).

RFT is a way of generalizing how individuals react to a given situation. There are three characteristics based on RFT (Luciano, 2013). First, on how one lives, they then lived an

emotional problem in their lives and how they choose to handle them. Special education teachers work every day with students with disabilities and their challenges. What starts to happen is that their "verbal" inner self deals with the constant negatives, such as the verbal or physical abuse from an emotional, behavioral student(s). It is their job, they just feel like it is expected, and they choose to live in this job. The second characteristic is learning to be flexible in dealing with those challenges (Luciano, 2013). Special education teachers observe the behaviors and needs taking place; they live in the moment of the challenge. Finally, the third characteristic is seeing oneself as a whole. Communicating with others and finding a feeling of inner peace within oneself (Luciano, 2013). Special education teachers need to understand that their emotions can be controllable with the right interventions.

Another component to RFT is that rule-government (Luciano, 2013). As adults, we rule ourselves, and we problem-solve our behaviors regarding others. Special education teachers can begin to feel they are losing the ability to govern themselves and not problem-solve their surroundings daily. That is why it is essential to have a strong foundation around them at work. At times, special education teachers feel isolated from other staff members or lack support from their administration (Anderson, 2017). When special education teachers feel they are no longer able to rule themselves, it is vital to find coping skills to help provide stress. According to the study, talking to staff members, having conversations with the administration are vital (Kebbi & Al-Hroub, 2018). The administration needs to be aware of the extra time before and after work put in by special education teachers. Other coping skills were being with friends, finding a hobby, or taking more naps (Kebbi & Al-Hroub, 2018). RFT helps teachers work on being aware of what is going on in their daily surroundings, putting perspective on the situations, and realizing that some things are not in one's control.

Purpose Statement

Without quality, effective special education teachers in our rural communities, more and more positions in that field will be hard to replace. A study done by Brunsting and colleagues (2014) focused on urban teacher burnout. It showed a gap in the idea that burnout is happening with all teachers, both urban and rural, and drawing the need to find out more about if rural special education teachers feel the same as they do in the urban school districts regarding the workload. Maintaining quality, effective special education teachers is a vital component of every school. Williams and Dike's (2015) research indicated that 57% of special education teachers had felt emotional exhaustion. Difficulties in keeping up the workload while still providing adequate, reliable instruction to students with disabilities, special education teachers are feeling burnout (Cancio et al., 2018). In previous literature, special education teachers are overwhelmed by the workload from the beginning to the end of the school year (Bettini et al., 2017). More professional development and resources need to be provided to help special education teachers feel adequate and thriving in working with students with special educational needs. Working after contracted hours, not enough time in the day for planning, and student behaviors are all indicators of stress, according to a study done by Kebbi & Al-Hroub (2018). When stress becomes overpowering, and teachers are no longer feeling satisfied with their jobs, depersonalization can take over (Kebbi & Al-Hroub, 2018). Special education teachers are leaving their careers due to burnout. Therefore, causing a shortage of special education teachers to fulfill the needs of our most vulnerable students. A study by Brunsting and colleagues showed the job demands, uncertainties of how the duties and lack of administration support leave special education teachers feeling hopeless and leaving their position (Brunsting et

al., 2014). Studies addressing how support groups or more professional development for special education teachers need addressing will strengthen the desire to continue in the career.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenology study is to explore the perception of special education teachers in rural community school districts in how the workload of their profession affects their overall well-being. Three elementary special education teachers from rural community school districts took part in an open-ended questionnaire over their perspective on the workload, duties, and stress level they experience. With the current studies on special education teachers and their workload, the Researcher wants to explore if elementary special education teachers in rural school districts are overwhelmed and have feelings of inadequateness due to the workload.

The bottom line is that special education teachers are leaving the profession exhausted and feeling emotionally drained. They are overworked and under-appreciated by their administration. The administrators need to address the workload and extra duties when a typical rural special education teacher works with all groups, not just one type of disability. This study will open to how our special education teachers in rural areas feel and what keeps them in the rural school district.

Methods

At the beginning of the 2020-2021 fall semester, special education teachers working in rural school districts provided data for this phenomenology study. Through open-ended data was collected from the responses. These responses were based on their perception of the workload and its effects on them.

Participants

Three elementary special education teachers participated in this case study. The teachers worked for a rural community school in Iowa. Education teachers who work in a school district where the town in which the school district location has a total population of 2,500 or less are considered rural. (What is Rural, 2019). The teacher participants were females and range in age from 39- 64 years old. This group's demographics are 100% Caucasian. The median average of the participants teaching elementary special education is 16 years. Before teaching in special education, one Teacher taught in a transitional kindergarten classroom for one year. The other two participants have always been special education teachers. Participation in this qualitative study was voluntary, with no incentives given to participating in the case study.

Participants were selected through open communication by the Researcher with various special education teachers in a rural area interested in participating in the case study.

Materials

The Researcher used a 13.5" Spin 5 Acer laptop to write up and send informational sheet about the study, a consent form, the questions, and a thank you letter. A color LaserJet Pro MFfP M28Lfdw printer was used in making copies of the questions answered by each participant. Scissors applied to cut up and group the questions. Highlighters were utilized in various colors to highlight and code several times the responses to the questions.

Data Source

Questionnaire. The Researcher sent each participant a questionnaire by way of an email. The data source's purpose was to get more in-depth answers from the participants by leaving them open-ended. The Researcher wanted to identify the effects of the workload as a rural

special education teacher in their perspectives. Each participant received the same questions in the same format.

Procedures

The Researcher contacted each participant by phone or Facebook messaging to get their personal email address. The Researcher then sent out a personal email giving more detail to the study, a consent form, and the questionnaire (see Appendix A, B, & C). The participants all received the questionnaire on the same day separately for confidentiality. The reliability rates for adherence to the questionnaires were 98% or higher. The responses came straight from the participants' perspectives, and all questionnaires sent out were formatted the same. When the Researcher received the answers, two copies were made. This allowed the Researcher first to use it as a reference. The second copy was then cut up and grouped to each question. The questions were then taped together to keep them together. As a researcher, and realizing coding was getting sloppy, the questions were transcribed onto Word. The questions and the responses were put in a vertical table, leaving the left side open, allowing the Researcher to code more precisely, then coding the words line by line.

Data Analysis. This study is based on the perception of elementary special education teachers from rural school districts. Digging deeper into how the workload as a special education teacher affects them individually. Since the participants' perspectives drive the research, it is a qualitative phenomenology study (Lester, 1999). To provide a well-organized coding system, the Researcher incorporated a 6-step process from Braun and Clarke (see Appendix D). This is a logical approach because the study is a single-case study and allows the Researcher to develop a

strong start to the coding process, allowing for themes to emerge. The first step was to get familiar with the data.

The Researcher read through each participant's feedback based on the questionnaire several times. It was allowing the Researcher to become familiar with the data. The Researcher jotted down any bias that needed to be avoided in each participant's responses and initial ideas about codes. After the Researcher understood each of the participants, the researchers organized all the responses to each question. By doing this, the Researcher could move onto the second phase of the coding process.

In the second phase, the Researcher began to look at each piece of data line by line. Single words and short phrases were written down. The research read the lines several times, looking for similarities, differences, and pieces of the data that seemed to be relevant while keeping in mind the research question. Throughout the second phase, the Researcher was able to dig deeper into each message given by each participant's responses. Keeping in mind that some of the information may need consideration for further research. The process of combining, refining, and separating words or phrases to make a more transparent relationship to the research question, "What effects does the workload have on special education teachers in rural school districts?" After several codes had emerged, similar words started to form together; it was now time for the third step.

In the third step, the Researcher was ready to look more into patterns of essential details to the data. The research then started reviewing, thinking, and observing how everything was coming together. The Researcher then developed names for the overarching themes and defined them on how the workload affects the participants personally. Those themes that developed that

affect special education teachers' workload are time restraints, compassion, self-perseverance, support, and thinking about quitting.

Findings

Five significant topics to the effects of the workload on special education teachers in rural school districts emerged from the qualitative study; time restraints, compassion for the job, self-perseverance, support, and leaving the profession. These topics encompass the perceptions of the three special education teachers who took part in the qualitative study. In table 1 are the demographics of the three participants who took part in the qualitative study.

Demographics of the Participants

Age	Gender	Nationality	Yrs. of teaching special education
39	Female	White	18
48	Female	White	13
64	Female	White	17

Time Restraints

The special education teacher's significant effect crossed all discussions of time restraints based on the data collected. Data related to time restraints are found by the teachers' perspectives, as seen in figure 1. Time restraints are the inability or limitations of completing something due to a shortage of time (Harris, 2004).

Figure 1

Time restraint quotes from the elementary special education teachers

“This year my administrator has worked with me to allow me to have more work time in my day, taking so much stress off of my after school hours”

“Keeping up with the paperwork”

“Hardest part of my job is keeping up with the curriculum and pushing in two self-contained student to do more. With all the small groups I see, plus them, I worry that I am cutting them short. I often have to find supplemental materials to the classroom because they usually work independently or with their aid, and it has to be stuff that the aid is able to help them with. I unfortunately do not have enough time in the day to complete content area time with each of these two students aside from reading and math”

“...hardest part of my job is the alternate assessment, especially ELA portfolio. It takes a lot of time, even with only having three evidence pieces this year. There are lots of deadlines to meet, and evidence to collect in a timely manner, where there isn't always time”

“...time does not allow her to give me much guidance”

“With helping out with my level 2/3 student and having 3 of my other students on virtual learning at this time, I do not have time to schedule in a planning time”

“last year I had fifteen minutes a day, and I was drowning – like I said I almost quit. ...It is not enough time.”

“I still have to stay after school, but not for nearly as long as I use to.”

“I rarely have the opportunity to actually plan for 30 minutes. Instead enter school an hour early each day to do this”

“I usually stay until 6:00 each night to prepare for the next day, sending a copy of my lessons to my virtual students, entering probes on my IEPs and setting up meeting for IEP meetings. I also usually go in on Sunday night to get things ready for the next week”

“I do stay after school at least one-two night per week until 5pm”

Compassion for the job

While keeping the Teacher's perceptions reliable, the theme correlates to the workload's effects. Throughout the data processing, the teachers all made similar responses to their job's feelings regarding their role as a special education teacher. It is their compassion for what they

do that while the workload affects them based on time restraints, they can justify. In figure 2, a breakdown of the quotes are shown of how their compassion for the job does not allow the negatives to overtake what they do.

Figure 2

Compassionate quotes from the elementary special education teachers

“always wanted to be a teacher”

“my son was diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome and I learned the law to advocate for him”

“I became a special education teacher because my sister was in special education”

“I wanted to become a special education teacher since I was 11 years old”

“I knew I wanted special education students to know that they mattered, had so much to offer, and to be their voice in the school setting and with peers”

“I always wanted to be a teacher”

“I worry that I am cutting them short”

“... helping a teacher’s aide with a level 2/3 student”

“I feel we can’t concentrate on the disability but on what the needs are for the student, and then strive to reach those needs, regardless of the disability”

“I know they are unable to control their behaviors. I really don’t take it personally, and we start fresh every day”

Self-perseverance

In considering this theme and how it arrived, the Researcher did a rigorous look into the teachers' overall perceptions and how many times they referenced self-perseverance.

Perseverance is that not giving up, even when things are tough (webster's). The Researcher grouped comments about coping, confidence, emotions to the job, and self-reflecting about this

theme. The statements made after answering the question, *have you ever been verbally or physically abused by a student(s) on an IEP? If so, how did it make you feel?*

“Yes, many times. Most times it has never bothered me, as I know that they are unable to control their behaviors. I really don’t take it personally, and we start fresh every day. I really do believe that it is all about the relationship building.”

“Yes, this often occurs in my current position. It makes me think about what I could have done better or how to meet the needs of that student.”

Other comments throughout the data about self-perseverance are as follows: “...started doing an evening devotion, that helps me regroup and realize what is truly important.” “Just sit back and reflect on what happened and how I can make changes.” “...as Nemo says, just keep swimming.”

Support

From the special education teachers' perspective for this study, all three felt they have support from their administration. A question asked by the Researcher, “*Are you able to communicate with your school administration (principal) to receive resources need to provide each of your students their individualized learning needs based on their disability?*” Participant two stated the following

“Yes. This one area that I do believe my administrator relies on my knowledge and will get me things that I say that I need for my students without much questioning if I can give her the reason behind my request.”

Another question asked was *if they felt their administration supports them or the IEP needs of the behavior goals that are doing the verbal/physical abuse?*

"Absolutely. When I call and say I need her now, she is there as fast as she can get up the stairs without hesitation. If she is going to be out of the building, she prepares me with a backup of who I can call if necessary. She will observe and handle the student, making it so that I don't have to. When she is in the room, I become the second set of eyes."

"We are a PBIS school. We also have a special education teacher that is supposed to take care of behaviors, many times, that behavior that is being exhibited is in the calm down stage by the time she can help." (participant two)

"I do believe my administration supports me." (participant three)

Thinking about quitting

Fourteen codes were recorded that participants referred to leaving or changing their jobs at one time or another. "I very much would have in the past, but now I have been a special education teacher for so long, I would have to learn so many new things." "I almost did, but then had a change of heart." "Yes, especially last year." "thinking about leaving."

As a result of three special education teachers' perceptions in a rural school district, the workload affects them negatively due to time restraints and thinking about leaving. However, to be true to the data's reliability, the teachers' responses over the workload negativity were out mentioned by their responses being more positive. The teachers gave more insight into the questions by making statements about caring, helping, not wanting to leave kids behind, and worrying about cutting them short. One Teacher even mentions how she has to put ten different independent tasks each day for a student. The student gets upset if the Teacher is trying to put some tasks together if she is in the room. Therefore, the Teacher will stay after school to complete the tasks, rather than upsetting the student. Throughout the data, the Teacher's

comments stated how hard the job is for them; they come home exhausted but respect it as part of their job. Another teacher said how “I love what I do, but it is not for the faint of heart, not a cookie-cutter job where you can go home and not think about work.” Having compassion for your job and self-perseverance is what keeps these ladies teaching. The other result shown was that of support. One Teacher stated how she almost quit last year; she was not feeling the support from her administration. She had a forty-five-minute lunch recess duty every day with a fifteen-minute a day prep. She stated how this year, she was finally able to get the administration to switch her to a thirty-minute recess only with a longer prep time.

Trustworthiness

The Researcher showed credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability to address trustworthiness in the phenomenology study. To establish credibility, all participants were elementary special education teachers in a rural school district. Each participant had received a consent form. If they had any questions, they could contact the Researcher. Transferability is met due to various participants took part in the study. It was not a single-case study. Therefore, it is transferable because it can be conducted in multiple settings, such as secondary special education teachers or urban elementary special education teachers. In the paper's methods section, the Researcher showed a detailed description of the study for dependability. At the beginning of the data collecting process, the Researcher was aware of reflectivity. The research was conscious of bias to take place. Therefore, at any time during the coding, jotted down potential opinions that the Researcher had. Able to refer to the notes as reminders to be vigilant to the participants' perspective only.

Research Positionality. As an elementary special education teacher in a rural school district, I understand I am aware of a special education teacher's role. Choosing the topic of the effects of

the workload on special education teachers is right for me. As I was reading through the responses to the questions breaking down each answer, I set aside my own opinions. That created me to dig deeper into their perspectives, not my own. Not realizing what was evolving from the data, I gained a stronger appreciation for the challenges every special education teacher faced. The participants' perspective taught me more about the steadfast perseverance to work with students with disabilities. To keep all bias from getting involved in the research, I will focus on only the participants' perspectives.

Discussion

This qualitative study examined the research question, "What effects does the workload have on special education teachers in rural school districts?" The participants filled out a questionnaire based on their workload and the stress of their daily role as a special education teacher. There is a trend in schools finding it harder to fill special education positions. It is essential to explore if the workload is too overwhelming, and teachers are burnout, feeling emotionally exhausted. As for the results of this study leading into answering if the workload leads special education teachers to feel overwhelmed and emotionally drained, the responses to the questions on the questionnaire after a rigorous time-staking involvement into the data and finding the themes to the overall perception of the Teacher's point of view of the topic, no.

Based on the data results, five themes emerged; time restraints, compassion, self-perseverance, support, and thinking about quitting. As some of these themes may not seem to correlate to the workload's effects as a single word, the participants' real perceptions drew the Researcher to those conclusions.

Based on Barry and Gravelle's past intervention in references to special education teachers, views about paperwork, lesson planning, and other non-instructional parts of the day made up 67% of the Teacher's dissatisfaction with their special education teachers' role (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). 17% of those dissatisfied directly commented on how they felt they had to use their time outside of school to compensate for getting all no-instructional demands done (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). While there were no statistical data to compare with the three participants' outlook on the workload, the amount of time they discussed their concerns about how lack of time seemed to hold them back during the day. They were exhausted by the end of the day due to student behaviors, paperwork, recess duties, meeting the curriculum's demands, alternate assessments, and IEP requirements as a special education teacher. They were showing that yes, the workload does effects them. It did not, however, keep them down.

What kept them from drowning in the workload was their compassion for the job. This is not where the Researcher was going; this was a highlight or one of the study's two unexpected findings. Berry and Gravelle (2013) conducted a study on the overall satisfaction of special education teachers in rural school districts. In their conclusions of what special education teachers liked best about teaching in a rural setting, 86% liked the small community atmosphere, allowing for building more relationships with parents and students outside of the school setting (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). The teachers in this study stated they had good relationships with their administration. It allowed them the freedom to feel trusted in their jobs and what they are doing to help our students with disabilities. For years of being a special education teacher, they have adapted to the rigor of working after or before school hours because it is what is best for their students. They were driven to be special education teachers because they always wanted to be, not just a teacher, but specifically a special education teacher. Two out of the three teachers

directly stated that due to a family member having a disability, it bonded them to the calling to help others with disabilities. Studies are out there about teachers leaving the profession due to workload and fatigue. More studies need to address why individuals want to be a special education teacher in the first place. Was it because it would make them more marketable to get a teaching position? Or could it be those who stick it out and go beyond the years to retirement have always had a passion for working with students with disabilities due to life experiences?

According to Kaff (2004), fifty-seven percent of the teachers felt unsupported in what they do as a special education teacher by the administration and other staff members. From this study, the teachers thought they had the support of their administration. One Teacher had mentioned that she had almost quit last year due to being overwhelmed with her job duties given by the administration. After voicing her concerns, the administration worked with her; she is in a much better place with her job. According to the study, talking to staff members, having conversations with the administration are vital (Kebbi & Al-Hroub, 2018). The administration needs to be aware of the extra time before and after work put in by special education teachers.

Regarding the characteristic of communicating within one's mind, using the "verbal" thinking by allowing to accept and understand that what is going on in life at work does not define one as a person, but it is a job (Emery 2010). That is the basis for the therapeutic intervention of ACT. The second highlight of the findings in this research study was that of each Teacher's self-perseverance. They are reflecting by acknowledging the stresses of their job, but it is their drive to want to help the students and be a voice for them that allows them to "keep swimming." This research's theoretical framework could not be a better fit for how these teachers perceive their jobs. Rational Frame Theory generalizes how individuals react to a given

situation (Luciano, 2013). They live their lives as special education teachers; they are aware of the behaviors, both verbal and physical, brought on by their students. One Teacher explained how she was physically abused to the point she had to go to the doctor. It had brought up past experiences and created a powerful pull on her emotions. In the end, she knew it was not the child but the behavior of the disability.

The final theme of the effects of the workload on special education teachers in rural school districts is quitting or leaving the profession. One participant stated how they would love to have set hours without recess duties and outside activities that are expected to do. Another almost quit due to a lack of administrative support. A study done by Robinson and colleagues showed that overall, teachers' first choice when leaving their occupation is depersonalization or lack of personal growth in fulfilling their daily roles as a special education teacher (Robinson et al., 2019).

Limitations

Besides the small number who participated in the study, another limitation is the demographic of those participants. All three teachers had been teaching for thirteen plus years. Therefore, their perspectives do not necessarily represent novice special education teachers in a rural school district. As well, they were all white females. A direction to take for further research would be to conclude novice teachers, both male and female. Another limitation was that all the teachers were within a forty-five-mile radius of each other.

Consequently, they have very similar surroundings in a rural setting in one state. The questionnaire may have hindered the study's genuine concept of the research question.

Implications

This study implies that the workload affects special education teachers in rural school districts. However, they do not allow the workload to take their desire and self-perseverance to work with students with disabilities.

Closure

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Appendix A

Appendix A

Email draft to send out to the special education teachers inviting them to participate in the qualitative study on the effects of the workload on special education teachers.

Dear Teacher's name (personalized to each potential participant),

I am conducting a questionnaire as part of a research study for Morningside College to increase my understanding of the effects of special education teachers' workload in rural community school districts. As a teacher in special education, you are in an ideal position to give me valuable first-hand information from your perspective.

I am merely trying to capture your thoughts and perspectives on being an elementary special education teacher in a rural district. To ensure confidentiality, I will not your name with anyone else.

There is no incentive for participating in this study. However, your participation will be a valuable addition to my research. Findings could lead to a greater public understanding of the effects of elementary special education teachers' workload in rural school districts.

If you are willing to participate, please let me know, and you can suggest a day and time that suits you. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

Thanks!

Juliana Goettsch

MVAO Elementary Special Education Teacher

Appendix B

Consent Form

Informed Consent Form for a Qualitative Study

Informed Consent Form for _____

I am Juliana Goettsch, a student at Morningside College. I am researching the effects of the workload on elementary special education teachers in rural school districts. This consent form provides you with details about the participation of the study. Please feel free to contact me via email if you have any questions.

Purpose of the research

working with students with disabilities is a very challenging career. Not only are you working with the most vulnerable students, but you may feel overwhelmed with other job requirements. I want to learn more about special education teacher's perspectives working in a rural setting. I believe you can help me by answering questions based on the workload and how you personally cope with your job's daily stressors.

Type of Research Intervention

This research will involve your participation in completing a questionnaire.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether to participate or not. You will not be provided any incentive to take part in the research. However, I know your input will be informative and beneficial to the research.

Confidentiality

Once the questionnaire is received back, your name will no longer be available. I will replace it with a number. This will allow me, as the Researcher, to maintain bias from the answering of the questions.

Who to Contact

If you have any questions, you can ask them now or later. If you have any questions later, you may contact me at any time via email.

I have been invited to participate in research about the workload of elementary special education teachers.

Print Name of Participant _____

Signature of Participant _____

Date _____

Day/month/year

I confirm that the participant was allowed to ask questions about the study. All the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the content has been provided freely and voluntarily.

A copy of this paper has been provided to the participant.

Print Name of Researcher/ person taking the consent

Signature of Researcher/person taking the consent

Day/month/year

Appendix C

Background

1. How many years, after this year, have you been a special education teacher?
2. Are you a full-time special education teacher for your district? If not, what other job titles are on your contract?
3. Do you live in the school district in which you work at?
4. How old are you?
5. Have you ever taught as a general education teacher? Why did you become a special education teacher?

7. If given the opportunity to work as an elementary general education teacher, would you consider it?
8. If you could make the same amount of money as you do today at a different job, would you consider it?
9. What is your nationality?

Tasks

1. What do you feel is the hardest part of your job?
2. Are you able to communicate with your school administration (principal) to receive the resources needed to provide each of your students their individualized learning needs based on their disability?
3. Have you been given the opportunity to learn more about a specific disability through your administration or AEA to help in providing adequate instruction for your students? If so, do you feel it is beneficial in teaching your students?
4. How much planning time is set in your daily work schedule each day? Do you feel this is adequate time for you?
5. Do you work after contracted hours, such as before, after or on the weekends? If so, please discuss about how much time you spend, and what you are working on (lesson plans, IEP paperwork, alternative assessment materials, preparing for the next day's instruction...etc.).
6. Do you have other duties other than working with special education students? Such as recess or lunch duties?

Physical effects of the job

1. Do you ever go home exhausted? If so, how often do you think you feel that way? Describe what makes you feel that way, such as the student's needs, paperwork, lesson planning, instruction or all of it.
2. Have you ever been verbally or physically abused by a student(s) on an IEP? If so, how did it make you feel?
3. Do you feel your administration supports you or the student's IEP needs with behavior goals that are doing the verbal/physical abuse?

Questions based on the Acceptance & Commitment Therapy Program

1. Who and what is most important to you?
2. What gets in the way of moving toward who and what matters most to you?

3. What do you do to move away from those painful inner experiences of your job?
4. What are you doing or do you want to be doing to move toward who and what is most important to you?

Appendix D

Six Steps of Writing

The Six Steps from the Braun and Clarke Thematic analysis method along with the Researcher's process

Step 1: familiarizing the data	The Researcher reads all the transcribed questions, getting oneself familiar with the readings. Jotting down notes, able to comprehend each answer
Step 2: Making initial codes	*cutting up the questions and putting them in groups. Begin to look for interesting, and meaningful data that relates to your research question
Step 3: Examining the questions for themes	*color code by highlighting phrases or words that pair together Sorting out important information grouping questions together
Step 4: Studying the themes	*looking for similarities, differences, and questions that may take the Researcher beyond the study in how each participant answered the questions

	Combining, refining, separating and discarding themes to be able to make a clear relationship to the research question.
Step 5: Creating names and defining the themes	*breaking down the two main themes, workload and stress, developing subthemes Naming the themes and developing the participants' perceptions to the question of how the workload affects them personally
Step 6: Write up	Creating an analytical view of the study and its results based on the hypothesis.