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NAVIGATING CHALLENGES WITH TENACITY: EXAMINATION
OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS' PERSEVERANCE
FOR AT-RISK STUDENT POPULATIONS

by

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to first and foremost, God. Without you, none of my dreams would ever come to fruition. To my dad, Richard, who I lost in 2020. You were such an inspiration to me and not a day goes by without the thought of all that you instilled in me since I was a little girl. I know that you will forever be my guardian angel. To my mother, Deloris, thank you for your continuous and overflowing love and support. There are so many ways you have shown your love to me and helped in ways I would never imagine. I love you and will always appreciate all that you have done for me. To my brother, Rich, I appreciate all the positive conversations and encouragement you have provided me. You have always pushed me to be a better version of myself; there is no way to ever return all the guidance you have provided. You have been such an amazing leader and an even better big brother. To the other half of M&M, my nephew, Mr. Myles. I hope that you one day look to the path set before you and realize that there is nothing that you can't do. You have already brought so much joy to this family; you have my forever support and always remember to reach for the sky. To my sister-in-law, Frances, whose enduring support for our family's well-being has been a pillar of strength throughout my journey. To my aunts: Dorothy, Inell, Mary, Ruby, and in loving memory of Martha and Edith; to my uncles: Robert, Lynn, and in remembrance of Junior; and to my grandparents, whose legacies continue to inspire me every day. Your wisdom, love, and guidance have illuminated my path. Thank you for everything. To my cousin besties, Demetris and Ron, I appreciate your patience, love, and understanding throughout this journey of life, and I am grateful for both of you always sticking by my side. To my family and friends, I appreciate your allowing me the time to focus and become a better version of myself. The best is yet to come. I love and appreciate every one of you.

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ABSTRACT

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University of Houston-Clear Lake, 2024

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The purpose of this study was to explore the unique and lived experiences of early childhood educators, in the context of their perseverance and dedication to the teaching profession amidst diverse challenges. This study sought to delve deeply into the theme of tenacity, focusing on the motivating experiences and characteristics that drove these educators to persist and demonstrate commitment in their roles. This study includes a review of data collected from interviews of early childhood elementary teachers who teach at-risk student populations. A purposive sample of 10 early childhood teachers was interviewed. The interviews provided an in-depth understanding of the teachers' lived experience in teaching and the motivators behind their resilience and persistence. The findings of this study are expected to contribute knowledge about experiences of early childhood educators, offering a deeper understanding of what drives and sustains educators in challenging teaching environments. The recommendations should serve as valuable

contributions to the field of early childhood education, offering both academic and practical insights that can inform policy, practice, and future research.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) is the foundational stage for lifelong learning (Bowman et al., 2001). In recent years, the ECE sector in the United States has seen significant changes, with pressing issues like care shortages for infants and toddlers and increased diversity in student populations (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009).

The rise in children with special needs participating in ECE and the persisting challenge of staff retention, particularly in underfunded areas, highlights the sector's evolving challenges. Future projections suggest growth in the young child population and a rise in demand for early care, alongside increasing cultural and linguistic diversity (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). ECE providers are vital in shaping early development (Bartlett & Smith, 2019; Phillips & Lowenstein, 2011), yet face high turnover, especially when working with at-risk students.

The financial disparities between the Pre-K-12 public education system and the early childhood education (ECE) sector highlight a critical gap in resources and professional recognition. Liu et al. (2023) emphasize that early childhood educators face significant pay inequities, contributing to the challenges of retaining qualified professionals in ECE settings. This gap underscores the urgent need for systemic reforms to ensure equitable compensation and recognition for educators across all levels of the education system. These disparities are especially pronounced in funding allocation across different regions (Raikes & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Working in trauma-informed settings adds to the stress for educators (Chudzik et al., 2023), necessitating research into support and retention strategies.

This transcendental phenomenological study focused on understanding factors contributing to the resilience and perseverance of early childhood educators in urban and suburban settings. It explored their adaptation to inclusive education demands and strategies to support diverse student needs, particularly in at-risk populations (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). The research, guided by Deci & Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory, aims to address gaps in knowledge regarding educator retention (Day & Gu, 2009; Chiong et al., 2017) and contributes to understanding the complexities of early childhood education.

Research Problem

Children's early experiences can significantly influence their life trajectories (Markowitz, 2019). In the US, early childhood education (ECE) faces a persistent challenge with high staff turnover, estimated to be as high as 37% annually (Bassok et al., 2021). This issue has been intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, further complicating staff recruitment and retention (Bassok et al., 2021). Staff turnover not only increases program costs but also adversely affects staff morale, program quality, teacher-child relationships, and children's academic and social-emotional development (Hale-Jinks et al., 2006; Cassidy et al., 2011; Tran & Winsler, 2011; Markowitz, 2019; Kwon et al., 2020). For instance, Markowitz (2019) links teacher turnover directly to increased behavior problems and reduced literacy gains among children. Research has found that an early childhood teacher's inability to understand and manage challenging behaviors in students can lead to adverse social reactions that could result in suspension or even expulsion from the classroom or school (Sutherland et al., 2018). Phillips et al. (2017) note that while many early childhood education programs specifically target disadvantaged children, defined by varying income thresholds, others are available universally. Additionally, specific programs cater to a significantly higher number of

dual-language learners and children with special needs. Additionally, turnover intentions among staff can impact their ability to provide quality care (McMullen et al., 2020).

While early childhood education (ECE) programs strive to provide developmentally appropriate learning opportunities, often within challenging family and community contexts (Sciaraffa et al., 2018), attempts to professionalize the field through educational requirements and ongoing professional development (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2022) have not seen corresponding salary increases. Despite longstanding efforts to elevate ECE professional salaries (Whitebook et al., 2014), compensation still needs to be improved, frequently aligning with the federal poverty guideline (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). This reality underscores the need to explore turnover's modifiable factors beyond salary, given the emotionally and physically demanding aspects of ECE work (Kwon et al., 2021).

Early childhood education is the cornerstone of lifelong learning, establishing foundational academic and social skills that impact future success (Bowman et al., 2001). As educational paradigms shift towards inclusion, ensuring that all children, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities, have equitable access to quality education has become imperative (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). This statement is particularly true for at-risk student populations who often face multifaceted challenges in their learning journeys.

A crucial factor in the success of inclusive education is the perseverance and dedication of early childhood educators. The very essence of inclusivity means that educators constantly navigate a diverse educational terrain, address a spectrum of needs, and facilitate an environment where every child can thrive (Pianta, 2016). However, the complexities and demands of such a setting can be taxing, both emotionally and professionally.

Despite the recognized importance of early childhood educators' roles in inclusive settings, there is a gap in the literature regarding a deeper exploration of their lived experiences, particularly their tenacity in navigating challenges. This research is necessary to understand the reasons behind staff turnover in early childhood education and develop effective strategies for educator retention. Understanding what drives their perseverance, how they overcome obstacles, and what support they require can offer invaluable insights for educational policy, training, and practice. Therefore, this research sought to delve into the heart of this issue, exploring the factors influencing early childhood educators' decisions to stay in the profession.

Significance of the Study

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of early childhood educators, particularly their perseverance and dedication to the teaching profession amidst diverse challenges. As the educational landscape continuously evolves, especially within the confines of early childhood education, understanding the intrinsic and extrinsic motivators that drive educators becomes paramount (Bowman et al., 2001).

Within the complex landscape of early childhood education, educators are pivotal agents of change, nurturing young learners' cognitive, social, and emotional growth. The specialized realm of inclusive education for at-risk student populations further accentuates the roles and responsibilities of these educators (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Societal and institutional pressures, rapidly evolving curricula, diverse classroom settings, and the unique challenges posed by scaling and implementing effective early childhood education programs intensify the demands placed on teachers (Foundation for Child Development, 2020).

This research sought to examine the experiences of early childhood educators, emphasizing the array of experiences that inform their commitment to teaching. Several studies have highlighted the importance of internal and external motivational factors that drive teacher commitment in the ever-challenging environment of inclusive education (Deci et al., 2000; Taylor et al., 2014). This study aimed to expand on these findings, diving deeper into educators' personal and professional stories. Educators in today's environment deal with an array of challenges. From the pedagogical adaptations necessary for inclusive education to addressing the diverse needs of students and societal expectations of educators' roles, there is a crucial need to explore how educators can navigate these challenges effectively and what strategies prove most effective in implementing inclusive educational practices. (Duncan et al., 2012).

This study also aimed to discover how early childhood educators perceive the support structures available to them. Are they deemed sufficient? How do they align with their needs, and where are the gaps? The answers to these questions can pave the way for refined policy measures and institutional strategies to bolster educator support (Wells, 2014).

The core concept actively asserts that every student, regardless of race, gender, socioeconomic status, or personal characteristics, deserves an equal opportunity for academic achievement, aiming to ensure that educational results do not stem from unequal access to learning opportunities. Within this broad spectrum, at-risk student populations have emerged as a segment that requires nuanced understanding and specialized attention. This study's focus on the tenacity of early childhood educators in inclusive environments tailored for these students holds massive weight in the current educational discourse, especially considering the intricacies associated with teaching such populations.

Historically, educational paradigms have evolved to incorporate diverse pedagogical approaches aimed at addressing the needs of all students. Given that students with mild educational disabilities often share similar characteristics and life experiences with at-risk students, there is a significant overlap in the interventions required (Johnson, 1998). This research seeks to explore the practices and strategies used by educators to address these needs effectively. By examining these methods, the study aims to enhance the framework of inclusive education, providing insights that could lead to replacing the traditional concepts associated with mild educational disabilities with a more comprehensive and less stigmatizing approach tailored for at-risk students (Johnson, 1998).

Inclusivity in education is more than just a catchphrase; it is a commitment to ensuring every child feels seen and heard and meets their needs. With the increasing recognition of the value of diverse classrooms, there is a pressing need to understand and champion practices that embody inclusivity, especially for at-risk students. By emphasizing the role of educators in these settings, this study seeks to inspire broader systemic change, promoting a culture that permeates every classroom, every lesson, and every interaction.

Working with at-risk student populations is a constant learning, adaptation, and growth journey. This study aimed to navigate this journey alongside educators, glean insights and sharing knowledge, hoping to craft a brighter, more inclusive future for every student.

Research Purpose and Question

The purpose of this study is to explore and examine the unique experiences of early childhood educators, particularly in the context of their perseverance and dedication

to the teaching profession amidst diverse challenges. The following research question guided this study:

What personal and professional experiences do early childhood educators describe when teaching at-risk student populations?

What factors are perceived by early childhood educators working with at-risk student populations as contributing to their ability to continue teaching amidst challenges and setbacks?

Definitions of Key Terms

At-Risk Student Populations: Students who face significant challenges in meeting academic or social benchmarks, or in graduating from high school. Such students often need additional support and resources to succeed and achieve their full potential. Various factors can lead to a student being considered at-risk, including academic struggles, social challenges, and other external or personal difficulties (Baum & McPherson, 2019; Watson & Gemin, 2008).

Inclusive Education: A teaching approach and educational strategy in which students with special needs or disabilities are educated in mainstream classrooms alongside their peers instead of being segregated (Ainscow & César, 2006).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT): A broad theory of human motivation and personality, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) examines the extent to which human actions are chosen freely or endorsed by the self. At the heart of SDT lie autonomy, competence, and relatedness principles (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Perseverance: The continued effort to achieve despite challenges, failures, or opposition. In the educational context, it refers to the determination of educators to navigate challenges and continue teaching effectively (Duckworth & Gross, 2014).

Early Childhood Education: The period of learning that takes place typically from birth to eight years old, a time recognized as the most crucial phase in a human's educational and cognitive development (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

Autonomy: Within the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), it signifies the drive to be the architect of one's existence and to behave in congruence with one's cohesive self. (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Competence: The need to effectively interact with and manage one's environment. Education pertains to an educator's belief in their capability to teach, manage classroom behavior, and ensure students learn (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010).

Title I schools: Title I schools, characterized by a high proportion of low-income students, receive federal funding through Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This financial support aims to assist students in achieving academic standards. (Sutcher et al., 2019).

Relatedness: The inherent desire to connect, interact, and form bonds with others, and in the context of education, it relates to the relationships educators form with their students, peers, and the larger educational community (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Novice Teacher: Educators in the early stages of their professional teaching careers typically encompass the first three to five years of full-time teaching (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

Veteran Teachers: experienced educators who have accumulated a significant number of years in the teaching profession, typically more than a decade (Ingersoll, 2003).

Pedagogical Trends: Evolving methods and practices of teaching and instruction that reflect current research, technological advancements, and societal shifts in understanding how students best learn (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005).

Educational Equity: The fundamental idea is that all students should have the same chance to achieve academic success, regardless of their race, gender, socioeconomic background, or other individual traits, ensuring that disparities in educational outcomes are not due to unequal learning opportunities (Noguera et al., 2015).

Special Education: Tailored instruction to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities. It includes individualized educational programs and services to ensure these students benefit from their educational environment (Turnbull et al., 2010).

Resilience in Education: The ability of educators and students to adapt to adversities, maintain emotional balance, continue personal development, and engage in meaningful teaching and learning despite the challenges they face (Brunzell et al., 2015).

Inclusive Practices: Methods and strategies employed by educators to accommodate and support students with diverse needs within mainstream classrooms, ensuring equal access to the curriculum and fostering a positive learning environment (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Professional Development (PD): Educators are offered Continuous learning opportunities to enhance their teaching skills, knowledge, and practices. Effective PD is often collaborative and allows educators to practice new strategies and receive feedback (Garet et al., 2001).

Motivational Drivers in Education: Factors that inspire and encourage educators to pursue their roles with dedication and enthusiasm. These can be intrinsic (e.g., the joy of teaching) or extrinsic (e.g., professional recognition) (Kusurkar, et al., 2013).

Conclusion

This chapter examined the purpose of the study, background information related to the research problem, the significance of the study, and key definitions to help

understand concepts presented throughout the research. In addition, this study explored the unique experiences of early childhood educators, particularly in the context of their perseverance and dedication to the teaching profession amidst diverse challenges. The next chapter will review the essential topics to provide more research on this study.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Educators face multifaceted challenges when it comes to nurturing the growth and development of early childhood students, especially those from at-risk populations. Research has shown that the resilience and perseverance of teachers in these settings are pivotal for student success. Hiver and Dörnyei (2015) emphasize the significance of teacher resilience in educational contexts, particularly noting its impact on classroom dynamics and student engagement. They argue that resilience is not just a personal trait but a dynamic process shaped by the educational environment (Hiver & Dörnyei, 2015, p. 15).

Similarly, Gu and Day (2013) highlight the role of perseverance in teaching, suggesting that educators' sustained commitment significantly influences student outcomes, especially in challenging circumstances (Gu & Day, 2013, p. 220). These insights set the stage for exploring the unique lived experiences of early childhood educators, delving into how they navigate their professional journeys amidst diverse challenges. A critical concern for educators is identifying and understanding the factors that bolster their resilience and enable them to continue imparting education effectively despite potential setbacks. This inquiry holds relevance in early childhood education, where foundational experiences shape at-risk student populations.

This transcendental phenomenological study aims to understand the unique lived experiences of these educators, focusing on how they sustain their commitment and effectiveness amidst various challenges. This literature review examines the following areas: (a) Early Childhood Education, (b) Issues with Teacher Resilience and Perseverance, (c) Teacher Resilience and Perseverance, (d) Systems of Support Inside the School: Mentorship and Professional Development, (e) Systems of Support Outside the

School: Family and Community Involvement, (f) At-Risk Student Populations, and (g) Self Determination Theory as the theoretical framework.

Each section will contribute to a holistic understanding of the factors influencing teacher resilience and perseverance, providing insights into practical strategies for supporting educators in their crucial roles within early childhood education settings.

Early Childhood Education

Early Childhood Education (ECE) has evolved significantly since its inception. One of the earliest instances of a structured early learning environment was established in 1816 by Robert Owen in Scotland. The school catered to children as young as two, providing education and care while parents worked (Gillard, 2011). This circumstance marked the beginning of a global recognition of the importance of early learning.

In the United States, the formal push for early education began around 1830 with a petition by the Infant School Society of Boston to include infant schools in the Boston Public School system, highlighting the growing awareness of the need for early educational interventions (Morrison, 2015).

Pioneers such as Rousseau, Froebel, and Montessori laid the theoretical foundations of ECE. Rousseau emphasized naturalistic approaches to child-rearing, influencing current pedagogical trends like nature play and authentic assessments (Rousseau, 1762). Froebel's concept of 'gardening' children to encourage their natural development led to the popularization of play-based learning (Froebel, 1907). Montessori's focus on the impact of environment on child learning gave rise to the Montessori method, emphasizing structured yet flexible learning environments (Montessori, 1912).

Despite its foundational role in children's development, the ECE sector has significant challenges. Recent studies highlight ongoing issues with teacher attrition and

inadequate compensation. A report by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) at UC Berkeley (2020) underscores that many ECE teachers continue receiving wages at or below the poverty line. This economic hardship contributes to high turnover rates, undermining the quality and consistency of early childhood education.

Early childhood education is a pivotal stage in a child's life, laying the groundwork for their academic and developmental journey. In early childhood education (ECE), one of the crucial challenges is the wage disparity among educators, significantly affecting the recruitment and retention of high-quality professionals. This wage gap, crucially tied to the success of children in ECE settings, often varies based on factors like race/ethnicity and gender. As highlighted in the study by Liu et al., (2023), ECE professionals typically earn lower wages than counterparts in similar roles across other fields. Addressing this disparity is essential for ensuring that ECE remains a robust and practical foundation for young learners' academic and developmental pathways. This finding aligns with broader themes in ECE research, emphasizing the need for equitable and sustainable professional support to enhance early learning environments.

A pivotal study that contributes to this understanding used data from the 2019 National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE). Analyzing a representative sample of 5,192 ECE professionals, the study employed multivariate regression analyses to investigate wage disparities. The findings revealed that ECE educators from minority racial/ethnic backgrounds, including Black, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, and other races, earned lower hourly wages compared to White educators.

The intersection of race/ethnicity and gender significantly impacted wage equity. Black/African American male educators, for instance, earned higher wages than their female counterparts. In contrast, women of color, including Black, Hispanic/Latina,

Asian, and others, had the lowest average hourly wages compared to other groups in ECE. Additionally, Black and Hispanic/Latino men had higher average hourly wages than women of color but lower than white women.

These findings highlight systemic wage inequities within the ECE workforce and underscore the necessity of policy reevaluation and support enhancements to address these disparities. Understanding these wage dynamics is crucial for developing strategies to improve the ECE profession's appeal and ensure equitable compensation for all educators (Liu et al., et al., 2023).

Understanding the dynamics of teacher turnover is pivotal. Bassok et al. (2021) conducted a comprehensive study using administrative data from Louisiana's publicly funded, center-based early childhood programs. This study included various settings such as subsidized childcare, Head Start, and pre-kindergarten programs. The study's sample included around 5,900 teachers from approximately 1,500 programs, and it employed a descriptive analysis approach as part of the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) data from the Louisiana Department of Education.

The study revealed that over one-third of early childhood education teachers departed from their programs annually. Notably, teachers who left were typically rated lower on the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), indicating a potential correlation between turnover and the quality of teacher-child interactions.

These findings are crucial when integrated into the broader context of ECE research, especially concerning teacher retention and performance. High turnover rates, particularly in childcare settings and among teachers of younger children, highlight the challenges of maintaining stability and consistency in ECE environments. This turnover can adversely affect teacher-child relationships, which are foundational in early learning. The lower interaction quality among exit teachers suggests a pressing need for focused

professional development and support mechanisms. This study aligns with ongoing research efforts to understand and address factors leading to teacher turnover, especially in environments serving at-risk populations. Therefore, the research by Bassok et al. (2021) significantly contributes to our understanding of teacher turnover in ECE, emphasizing the importance of retaining high-quality educators for better child outcomes in early education.

The United States early childhood education (ECE) sector faces a critical challenge of high staff turnover, with rates reaching up to 37% annually (Bassok et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified this issue, further complicating staff recruitment and retention efforts (Bassok et al., 2021).

The study's findings are integral to understanding the resilience and perseverance of early childhood educators during the pandemic. It revealed significant staffing difficulties in childcare centers, with 90% of leaders reporting challenges and over half experiencing the loss of key staff. The financial strains exacerbated these difficulties due to decreased enrollment and subsequent revenue losses, leading to cost-cutting measures like staff layoffs and reduced benefits. The pandemic also introduced heightened health risks and altered job responsibilities for educators.

Significantly, the study highlighted the utilization of relief funds to support and increase staff wages. However, recruiting new teachers remained challenging, particularly for centers that had to lay off staff. These insights align with broader themes in ECE, emphasizing the importance of financial support and stable working conditions for maintaining a committed workforce, especially during crises. This comprehensive survey-based study by Bassok et al. (2021) thus sheds light on the complex dynamics of early childhood education during a global crisis, offering valuable insights into the real-

world challenges childcare leaders face and the implications for staffing stability and educator perseverance in the field.

Despite expectations that ECE programs deliver developmentally appropriate learning opportunities, efforts to professionalize the field with educational requirements and ongoing professional development (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2022) have yet to secure corresponding salary increases. Wages in the field often hover around the federal poverty guideline (Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Department of Health and Human Services, 2021; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022), contributing to high turnover rates along with the emotionally and physically demanding nature of the work (Kwon et al., 2021; Hale-Jinks et al., 2006; Totenhagen et al., 2016). Therefore, while advocacy for better pay continues, research also focuses on identifying other modifiable factors that could help mitigate turnover in ECE.

Understanding factors influencing educator turnover is crucial in early childhood education (ECE). A significant contribution to this understanding comes from the work of Herman et al., (2023), who examined the relationship between early childhood educators' sense of their work as a calling and their intentions to leave the field. Herman et al. (2023) conducted an insightful study involving 265 ECE professionals in Pennsylvania, utilizing the Calling and Vocation Questionnaire (CVQ) to assess participants' sense of calling in their work. The study categorized participants into tertiles of low, medium, and high presence of calling based on their CVQ scores.

The findings of the study were revealing. Herman et al. (2023) found an inverse relationship between the degree of perceived calling and the intention to leave the ECE field. Specifically, the study reported that the likelihood of intending to leave decreased significantly from the group with a low sense of calling to those with a high sense of calling, even after controlling for race/ethnicity and workplace stress. This research by

Herman et al. (2023) highlights the potential of cultivating a sense of calling in ECE professionals as a strategy to reduce turnover. This research aligns with extensive motivational theories within occupational psychology, which show that intrinsic factors, such as the experience of feeling called to a profession, are essential for retaining employees (Duffy et al., 2015; Dobrow, 2013).

Farewell et al. (2022) explored the job demands and resources in the early childhood education (ECE) sector, mainly focusing on staff working in high-need populations like Head Start programs. Their study utilized a cross-sectional survey method involving 137 ECE staff members, mainly from Head Start-funded centers serving preschool children aged 3–5 years. The Job Demands-Resources Model (JD-R) framed the research to assess how these factors influence job satisfaction and turnover rates among ECE staff.

Compared to the national workforce, ECE staff reported substantially higher personal demands, including increased levels of depression and perceived stress, and external demands like workload and staffing issues ($p < .01$). The ECE staff had limited access to personal resources, notably mindfulness, and external resources, such as a positive safety climate and effective management relationships ($p < .01$). The study found that only 34% of ECE staff were delighted with their job, which is less than the 49% in the national workforce. Observers noted a significant positive impact of external resources on job satisfaction ($B = .09, p < .01$).

ECE staff have shown higher susceptibility to chronic health conditions, such as obesity and diabetes, compared to the general population. The turnover rates for early educators were alarmingly high, ranging between 24% and 40% annually. Factors contributing to this included inadequate compensation and stressful working conditions. ECE staff in Head Start programs faced additional challenges due to the higher incidence

of adverse childhood experiences among the children they serve. The research suggests that improving job-related resources could significantly enhance job satisfaction among ECE staff.

Issues Contributing to Teacher Low Resilience and Perseverance

Teacher retention presents a significant challenge in early childhood education. Research says that 80% of the attrition in early childhood education involves educators who continue to work within the field but do not stay at the same institution (Wells, 2015).

The study by Wells (2015) aimed to identify factors predicting retention and turnover among newly hired Head Start preschool teachers. The participants comprised 81 eligible teachers from 10 Head Start centers in a Midwest city, with a final sample of 65 completing initial questionnaires due to early attrition. Although 81 teachers met the study's eligibility requirements, 12 teachers left their teaching positions within the first 30 days of the school year. Of the 69 teachers, four more dropped out of the study due to feeling insecure and not wanting to get into trouble. The participants received two questionnaires, one gathering demographics and the other a job satisfaction survey.

The methodology included descriptive statistics, chi-square, ANOVA, and binary logistic regression analyses to evaluate turnover by the mid-year follow-up, using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) to explore the quantitative questioning. Results revealed a 36% turnover rate and identified key factors influencing departure: lower desire to stay in the field, reduced happiness, weaker supervisor relationships, dissatisfaction with the work environment, and lower educational levels.

The study further found that these risk factors increased the probability of a teacher's departure. Lead teachers demographics, perceptions and attrition differed from assistants in marital status, education, workload perception, and facility adequacy. Wells

(2015) concluded that newly hired Head Start teachers might be more likely to quit because the company's policies and practices and the type of population they work with are less familiar to and accepted by them than by more experienced teachers.

Allen et al. (2017), Sims and Allen (2018), and the House of Commons Education Committee (2017) have all documented the substantial numbers of teachers leaving the profession early in their careers, a trend corroborated by additional research (Burghes et al., 2009; Lynch et al., 2016; Lightfoot, 2016). The survey conducted for this study, involving around 3,500 graduates of the UCL Institute of Education (IOE) in London, revealed workload and work/life balance as the primary reasons for leaving, despite respondents' initial awareness of these challenges. This contradiction suggests a discourse of disappointment, where the reality of teaching and the nature of the workload, driven by performativity and accountability, diverge significantly from initial expectations.

Further, the research contrasts the altruistic reasons for entering the teaching profession, such as a desire to make a difference, work with young people, and be passionate about the subject, with the practical realities that diminish teachers' enthusiasm. The resulting reasons for leaving or considering leaving the profession include not just workload but also a target-driven culture and the impact of government initiatives.

The performativity culture in education, which emphasizes efficiency, assessment, and progress measures at the cost of individualistic and creative aspects of teaching, plays a significant role in teachers' decisions to leave the profession. This culture often leads to de-professionalization, where teachers feel compelled to perform to demonstrate competence, as discussed by Tomlinson (2001) and Keddie (2017). The increasing regulation of teaching work in England since the 1988 Education Reform Act,

including the introduction of high-stakes testing and league tables, has contributed to this low trust, high accountability regime in education.

Teacher Resilience and Perseverance

Teacher resilience is crucial in mitigating burnout and maintaining job satisfaction among educators (Polat & İskender, 2018). Resilience, the capacity to adapt to and cope with challenges like heavy workloads, difficult students, and adverse school environments, enables teachers to recover from setbacks while sustaining motivation and energy (Mansfield et al., 2016). Research indicates that resilient teachers often exhibit a more positive attitude toward their work, experience reduced stress, and achieve higher job satisfaction than their less resilient counterparts (Daniilidou et al., 2020).

Furthermore, teacher resilience positively correlates with improved student outcomes, including enhanced academic performance and reduced behavioral issues. Several factors contribute to the development of resilience in teachers, such as social support from peers and school administrators, positive teacher-student relationships, and effective coping mechanisms (Beltman et al., 2011; Liu & Chu, 2022). It is essential to recognize that specific training and interventions can foster resilience, which is not innate.

Mellott's (2019) transcendental phenomenological study focused on understanding factors motivating early childhood educators to persevere in their roles for over five years at the same educational center in South-Central Pennsylvania. The study utilized Herzberg's Motivation Hygiene theory as its theoretical framework. Mellott conducted semi-structured individual interviews, a focus group, and observations with 13 teachers from four early learning centers. The study conducted its research across four sites in two small rural towns. The findings highlighted the importance of meaningful relationships, alignment with educational missions, and autonomy in influencing teachers'

perseverance. Recognizing the impermanence of stress and maintaining positivity were pivotal elements and coping strategies in teachers' continued commitment to early education.

Robertson-Kraft and Duckworth's (2014) study examined the impact of grit, defined as perseverance and passion for long-term goals, on the effectiveness and retention of novice teachers, particularly in low-income school districts. The study based its premise on the observation that traditional hiring metrics for teachers, like academic qualifications, do not reliably predict teacher effectiveness or retention.

The study utilized a longitudinal design with two distinct samples of novice teachers (N = 154 and N = 307) in challenging school districts. An innovative method assessed grit by analyzing teachers' résumés to rate their level of grit based on their involvement in college activities and work experiences. The study compared these grit ratings with other hiring metrics, such as SAT scores, college GPAs, and interview leadership ratings.

The findings revealed that teachers with higher grit levels were more effective and likely to remain in their positions throughout the academic year. Notably, grit was the only factor among those studied that predicted teacher effectiveness and retention. This research suggests that personal attributes like grit may be more critical in predicting teacher success, especially in demanding educational environments, than traditional academic or professional qualifications.

This research contributes to the broader understanding of teacher retention and effectiveness, highlighting the importance of non-traditional, personality-based traits in hiring and evaluating educators. The implications of these findings are significant for educational policy and practice, particularly in the context of recruiting and training teachers for challenging environments, especially those such as at-risk.

When educators feel valued and supported, they are likelier to remain committed to their profession and navigate challenges with tenacity (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). Furthermore, leaders prioritizing teacher well-being and offering emotional support can mitigate burnout and promote teacher perseverance (Maslach & Leiter, 2008).

Arslan's (2017) study investigates the interplay between individual and collective self-efficacy among Turkish preschool teachers. The study employed a causal research design and surveyed 172 teachers using the Teacher Self-Efficacy and Collective Teacher Self-Efficacy scales.

Results indicated a significant positive correlation between individual and collective self-efficacy. This finding implies that teachers' personal beliefs about their professional competence influence their contribution to group efficacy. The study highlights the importance of self-efficacy in collaborative educational settings, especially in early childhood education (Arslan, 2017).

Systems of Support Inside the School: Mentorship and Professional Development

An essential aspect of supporting early childhood educators, particularly those working with at-risk student populations, is understanding and enhancing their work-related well-being. Cumming and Wong (2019) offer a comprehensive exploration of this concept, proposing a holistic conceptualization of educators' well-being that integrates philosophical, psychological, physiological, organizational, and sociological perspectives. Their study underscores the complexity of educators' roles and the multifaceted nature of their well-being. It emphasizes the need for a morally anchored approach that recognizes educators' well-being as inseparable from their work contexts.

The relevance of this holistic approach to the theme of teacher perseverance in early childhood education is significant. As Cumming and Wong (2019) point out, the

demanding nature of early childhood educators' work, characterized by emotional, intellectual, relational, and physical challenges, directly impacts their ability to persist and thrive in their roles. Particularly for educators working with at-risk children, the compounded stresses and responsibilities highlight the necessity of a supportive work environment that addresses physical and psychological well-being and acknowledges the socio-political dimensions of their work.

Cumming and Wong's (2019) insights into the interplay of various factors affecting educators' well-being align well with the broader themes of teacher resilience and perseverance in early childhood education. Their work echoes the importance of considering intrinsic factors, such as personal satisfaction and meaningful engagement in the profession, alongside extrinsic factors, like adequate compensation and professional recognition. This comprehensive view offers a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by early childhood educators. It paves the way for targeted interventions to support their well-being and, consequently, their perseverance.

Furthermore, the study highlights the imperative of a shared responsibility model, where individual educators and the systems surrounding them contribute to creating and maintaining conditions conducive to educator well-being. This model resonates with the need for systemic changes in early childhood education policies and practices, especially in supporting educators working with at-risk populations. Fostering a work environment that holistically values and supports educators substantially increases the likelihood of enhancing teacher effectiveness, retention, and quality of education for at-risk children.

In conclusion, the work of Cumming and Wong (2019) provides a critical framework for understanding the multifaceted well-being of early childhood educators. Their holistic conceptualization of well-being is instrumental in guiding empirical

research and practical efforts to bolster educators' resilience and perseverance, especially in challenging environments with at-risk student populations.

In the realm of teacher professional development, a meta-analysis by Kraft et al., (2018) revealed that while teacher coaching can be beneficial, its effectiveness tends to diminish when implemented on a larger scale. This finding highlights a gap in research regarding the scaling up of in-service teacher professional development, particularly under government-led systems. RTI International and the Center for Global Development embarked on the Learning at Scale study to address this. Stern et al., (2021) aimed to understand the dynamics behind successful, large-scale coaching programs and to identify elements that contribute to the success of government-run programs. Preliminary results indicate that with adequate tools and knowledge, education officers at subnational levels can effectively support teachers.

Moreover, research indicates that mentorship is vital in enhancing teachers' professional skills, job satisfaction, and morale while mitigating stress and reducing burnout risks. Nonetheless, a critical question remains: What motivates teachers or education officers, particularly in decentralized systems, to assume the role of mentors and support their peers or subordinates? Kraft et al. (2018) evaluated the influence of teacher coaching on educational practices and student success. The study highlighted significant benefits by analyzing 60 studies on teaching methodology and student achievement, particularly in smaller, focused programs. The research emphasizes the importance of personalized, intensive coaching in professional development, especially in early childhood education, demonstrating its potential to enhance instructional quality and positively affect student learning. This mentorship aspect is particularly significant for the systemic sustainability of professional development initiatives (Kraft et al., 2018; Stern et al., 2021).

Reiman and Edelfelt (1990) identified several vital attributes for a productive mentor-protégé relationship in the context of mentorship in educational settings. These include an empathic mentor who understands beginning teachers' challenges, acknowledges their strengths, and is willing to learn from and guide the protégé, thus fostering a mutual partnership. Influential mentors model reflective practice, establish a rapport open to questioning, provide constructive feedback, advocate for novice teachers, and demonstrate multitasking abilities without being overwhelmed by the workload.

The concept of resilience, crucial in various professions, has been explored in diverse contexts, including the military. Striler et al. (2022), in their study 'Examining the Impact of Mentors and Role Models on Resilience,' found that mentors and role models significantly enhanced resilience in U.S. Army soldiers. This finding underscores the universal importance of resilience, a trait equally essential in early childhood education. Educators in this field often navigate complex and emotionally demanding environments where resilience becomes vital to personal well-being and effective teaching.

The role of mentorship and modeling observed in the military offers valuable insights into early childhood education. Just as mentors and role models promote resilience among soldiers, experienced educators can similarly mentor and serve as role models for newer teachers, providing support, guidance, and strategies for coping with professional challenges. This parallel suggests that strategies successful in enhancing resilience in the military might be adapted to support resilience among early childhood educators.

However, more research focusing on resilience in early childhood educators, mainly through mentorship and role modeling, still needs to be completed. The insights from Striler et al. (2022) highlight a potential area of exploration for future studies in educational settings. Understanding how mentorship and role modeling operate in early

childhood education can inform strategies to support educator resilience, ultimately enhancing teacher well-being and student learning outcomes.

Increasingly, experts recognize mentoring as a crucial component in supporting resilience and perseverance among professionals, including early childhood educators. The study by Arora and Rangnekar (2014) investigates explicitly the impact of workplace mentoring on career resilience, offering insights applicable to the early childhood education sector. This study adopted a cross-sectional survey design for early childhood education, gathering data from 205 managers across various public and private organizations in North India.

The study's focus on psychosocial mentoring, encompassing emotional support and role modeling, is particularly relevant for early childhood educators. In their profession, emotional and psychosocial support and technical guidance are crucial. Arora and Rangnekar's research revealed that such psychosocial mentoring significantly enhances career resilience. This finding resonates with early childhood educators' multifaceted challenges, from classroom management to addressing diverse student needs.

Implementing a similar methodology in early childhood education would involve surveying educators to assess the presence and quality of mentoring relationships, mainly focusing on the psychosocial aspects and measuring their impact on the educators' career resilience.

This approach would allow for a nuanced understanding of how mentorship supports educators in coping with their roles' emotional and professional challenges. The implications of Arora and Rangnekar's findings for early childhood education are profound. In a field characterized by significant emotional labor, mentorship that provides comprehensive support, addressing both professional skills and emotional

resilience, is invaluable. Such support can enhance job satisfaction, efficacy, and adaptability to various challenges.

In conclusion, Arora and Rangnekar's (2014) study sheds light on the critical role of mentoring in early childhood education. It emphasizes the need for mentorship programs that provide holistic support, enhancing the resilience and adaptability of educators in this crucial sector. By integrating this approach, educational institutions can foster a more resilient and effective workforce in early childhood education.

In the context of early childhood education, educators' significance is crucial in cultivating resilience among young learners is crucial. Ziobro (2018) offers insightful contributions to this field. Conducted at Rowan University, this research probes into how preschool teachers in an urban school in New Jersey interpret and implement resilience in their pedagogical practices.

Ziobro's qualitative study adopted a multifaceted approach, including semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and graphic elicitations, to explore the perspectives of 11 preschool teachers. This methodological choice allowed for an in-depth exploration of the teachers' diverse and complex views on resilience. The study revealed that personal and professional experiences significantly influence these perceptions, which, in turn, shape their teaching methods.

One key finding of the study is the influential role of professional discourse in evolving and refining resilience-focused teaching approaches. Engaging in dialogues with peers provided the teachers with opportunities to enhance their understanding and application of resilience in their classrooms. Ziobro's research emphasizes the necessity for platforms where educators can collaboratively reflect on and share their pedagogical strategies.

Applying Ziobro's findings to the broader landscape of early childhood education underlines the importance of professional development that targets resilience. The study suggests that teachers' ability to incorporate resilience into their classrooms can effectively be fostered through structured discussions and reflective practices. This research aligns with the increasing acknowledgment of the role of resilience in early childhood education, particularly in settings where children may face diverse adversities.

In conclusion, Ziobro's (2018) study significantly contributes to early childhood education literature by highlighting the impact of teachers' perceptions and practices on fostering resilience. It highlights the necessity of dedicating teacher training and professional development programs to resilience pedagogy, equipping early childhood educators to support their students' comprehensive development actively.

The retention of early career teachers remains a critical issue in the field of education. Talburt's (2020) qualitative instrumental case study offers a comprehensive examination of the factors influencing teacher retention, with a specific focus on the roles of leadership, professional learning, and resilience. Conducted in six school districts in the Midwestern United States, this study used a mixed-methods approach, integrating surveys, interviews, and focus groups to collect data from early career and veteran teachers and district-level professional learning directors.

Talburt's study involved 23 teachers participating in the Teacher Support and Retention Survey, interviews from five directors of professional learning, and focus groups among early career teachers. The study encompassed various contributing factors, including district demographics and student achievement, to provide a holistic view of the teacher retention landscape.

The findings identified several vital themes affecting early career teacher retention. Effective leadership and professional development emerged as crucial

elements, alongside the importance of mentoring, a supportive school culture, and community engagement. The study also highlighted work-life balance and feeling appreciated as significant factors. Despite a general sense of commitment and support, the study noted that stress and burnout were prevalent challenges, often leading teachers to contemplate leaving the profession.

Observers noted variations in teacher retention rates across districts, linking high retention in some districts to positive administrative support and community culture. In contrast, others faced challenges related to stress, student behavior, and compensation issues. The study's insights are particularly relevant for administrators and policymakers, underscoring the need for comprehensive support systems that foster teacher retention, professional satisfaction, and growth.

Classroom experience, pedagogical knowledge, cheerful disposition, interpersonal proficiency, conscientious listening, instructional planning, and providing constructive feedback are vital for effective mentorship. They are integral in fostering resilience and perseverance among early childhood educators. These traits equip mentors to address the specific needs of their mentees, many of whom may be navigating the complexities of working with at-risk student populations.

Systems of Support Outside the School: Family and Community Involvement

Experts increasingly recognize emotional factors as crucial in constructing teacher resilience (T.R.). Bobek (2002) highlights attributes such as a strong sense of competence, efficacy, achievement, and humor as significant emotional components of T.R. Similarly, Bardach et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of emotional intelligence in this context. In addition to these individual emotional factors, the role of interpersonal relationships within the social dimension is also vital. Sammons et al. (2007) note that mutually supportive professional and peer relationships are essential in

the development of T.R., underscoring the multifaceted nature of resilience in the teaching profession (Beltman et al.,2011).

In exploring the dynamics of work, family, and external support systems, Adams et al. (1996) conducted a study with 163 full-time workers who were part of extended degree programs at a university in Michigan. These participants, aged between 21 and 62 years ($M = 37.90$, $SD = 9.31$), represented a range of occupations, including educators, providing valuable insights into the early childhood education sector. The study employed survey methods to investigate the impact of work-family conflict and social support on job and life satisfaction.

Adams et al. (1996) discovered significant correlations between work-family conflict and job and life satisfaction, underscoring the crucial role of family social support in mitigating these challenges. These findings are particularly relevant for early childhood educators working with at-risk students, highlighting the importance of external support systems. The research revealed a reciprocal relationship where higher work interference with family activities led to reduced emotional and instrumental support and vice versa. This interplay is especially pertinent in education, where the demands of teaching can profoundly affect personal life and overall well-being.

The study by Adams et al. (1996) emphasized the necessity for strong support networks for early childhood educators, which should include both family and community involvement. When working with at-risk children, educators often encounter multifaceted challenges, including emotional and physical strains. Therefore, the availability of supportive external systems is critical to maintaining job satisfaction and personal well-being. The insights from this study provide valuable guidance for developing support structures specifically tailored to educators' needs in these demanding environments.

Understanding the internal dynamics influencing teacher effectiveness is crucial in early childhood education. Barni et al. (2019) offer valuable insights into this area. Published in *Frontiers in Psychology*, the research explores how teachers' values and motivations for teaching impact their self-efficacy, a key component in educational effectiveness.

The study's methodology involved surveying 227 Italian high school teachers using a comprehensive set of questionnaires. The questionnaires' design aimed to assess various personal values based on Schwartz's theory of human values, including dimensions such as conservation, openness to change, self-transcendence, and self-enhancement.

Additionally, the evaluation of teachers' motivations for teaching sought to understand whether controlled (external rewards) or autonomous (intrinsic value) motivations drove them. The study's primary aim was to determine how these personal values and motivations correlate with teachers' self-efficacy, which is their belief in their ability to effectively handle professional tasks and challenges.

This research is significant in early childhood education, highlighting the importance of aligning teachers' values with their professional roles. By understanding the intricate relationship between personal values, motivations, and self-efficacy, educational systems and professional development programs can be tailored to support the unique needs of teachers, fostering a more resilient and effective workforce equipped to manage early childhood education challenges (Barni et al., 2019).

At-Risk Student Populations

The concept of at-risk students is not limited to a single definition; rather, it encompasses a broad spectrum of students facing diverse risk factors. While there is no universally agreed-upon definition, researchers often identify at-risk students based on

factors such as socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, disabilities, English language proficiency, and other indicators (Rumberger, 2015). Understanding the heterogeneity within this category is crucial for developing effective interventions and support systems.

At-risk student populations often face substantial disparities in their academic performance when compared to their more advantaged peers. This persistent achievement gap is a significant concern within the field of education, and researchers like Duncan and Murnane (2014) have shed light on its complexity and implications. Their work emphasizes the enduring nature of this achievement gap, particularly among low-income students, who tend to experience educational disadvantages.

One of the key factors contributing to these disparities is at-risk students' limited access to high-quality educational resources. Research by Reardon (2011) delves into this issue, highlighting how children from low-income backgrounds often encounter barriers that hinder their access to enriched learning experiences. These barriers may include inadequate access to early childhood education programs, a lack of exposure to advanced coursework, and fewer opportunities for extracurricular activities and educational enrichment. For instance, low-income families may struggle to afford high-quality preschool programs, which research has shown can have a substantial impact on a child's readiness for formal schooling (Duncan et al., 2007). Additionally, the absence of access to advanced coursework and extracurricular opportunities may limit at-risk students' ability to reach their full academic potential, perpetuating the achievement gap (Reardon, 2011).

Disparities in educational resources can exacerbate differences in students' educational experiences. For example, students from low-income backgrounds may attend schools with fewer educational resources, including outdated textbooks, limited

access to technology, and inadequate facilities (Ladd, 2011). Such disparities can hinder their learning opportunities and potentially limit their academic achievements.

Socioeconomic status (SES) is a substantial risk factor that significantly affects students, particularly those from low-income families. The socioeconomic background in which children grow up plays a pivotal role in shaping their educational experiences and outcomes. The research conducted by Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) delves into the multifaceted challenges that students from low-income families encounter due to their SES.

One of the critical challenges stemming from low SES is the heightened risk of experiencing poverty-related obstacles. These obstacles encompass a range of issues, including inadequate access to nutritious meals, housing instability, and limited access to healthcare. These adversities can have profound consequences on children's readiness to learn and engage effectively in their education. For instance, students who lack consistent access to nutritious meals may struggle with hunger and related health issues, which can impede their cognitive development and concentration in the classroom (Jyoti et al., 2005).

Furthermore, housing instability, such as frequent moves or overcrowded living conditions, can lead to disruptions in a student's schooling, causing gaps in learning and challenges in building stable peer relationships (Masten et al., 1993). Additionally, limited access to healthcare can result in untreated health conditions that hinder students' attendance, participation, and overall well-being (Currie & Stabile, 2003).

To address the unique needs of low-income students and mitigate the impact of these socioeconomic disparities, interventions, and policies aimed at narrowing the achievement gap are essential. Levin's research (2012) underscores the importance of such targeted interventions. These interventions may include providing access to school-

based health services, nutritional programs, housing stability initiatives, and additional academic support to help students overcome the obstacles associated with low SES. In essence, socioeconomic status is a powerful determinant of a student's educational journey. Understanding the challenges that students from low-income backgrounds face, as highlighted by Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997), is crucial for educators, policymakers, and researchers working to reduce the achievement gap.

English Language Learners (ELLs) represent a distinct at-risk student population, and their unique needs require thoughtful attention within the educational landscape. ELLs are students who are in the process of acquiring proficiency in the English language, which can present challenges when accessing academic content and achieving educational success (August & Shanahan, 2006).

One of the primary challenges faced by ELLs is the potential struggle to comprehend and engage with academic content effectively, especially when it is primarily delivered in English. Language barriers can hinder their ability to understand complex concepts, follow classroom instructions, and effectively participate in class discussions. This language barrier can lead to disparities in academic achievement when compared to their English-proficient peers (Orosco & Klingner, 2010).

To address the specific needs of English Language Learners and mitigate the challenges they face, various educational approaches and interventions have been explored in the literature. One key finding, as emphasized by August and Shanahan (2006), is the importance of programs that offer targeted language support and culturally responsive instruction. Targeted language support programs are designed to provide ELLs with the linguistic tools and strategies they need to access academic content. These programs often include English as a Second Language (ESL) classes or English language development courses. The goal is to enhance students' English language proficiency,

enabling them to engage more fully in classroom activities and achieve greater academic success.

Culturally responsive instruction acknowledges and respects the diverse cultural backgrounds of ELLs. This approach recognizes that students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds may have unique perspectives and experiences that can be leveraged to enhance their learning. Educators who adopt culturally responsive practices create inclusive classroom environments that value students' identities and backgrounds, which can positively impact ELLs' engagement and academic performance (Gándara & Rumberger, 2009).

Students with disabilities constitute another significant at-risk student population within the educational landscape. These students face distinctive learning needs and challenges that require tailored support and strategies to ensure their academic success. In response to the educational needs of these students, inclusive education has emerged as a promising approach aimed at fostering a more equitable learning environment (Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009). Inclusive education is an educational philosophy and practice that emphasizes the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classroom settings alongside their non-disabled peers. The underlying principle is to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment that accommodates the diverse needs of all students. This approach seeks to break down barriers and promote a sense of belonging and participation for students with disabilities (Salend, 2019).

One of the fundamental advantages of inclusive education is its potential to provide students with disabilities access to a more varied and comprehensive educational experience. Inclusion allows these students to interact and learn alongside their typically developing peers, fostering opportunities for socialization, peer modeling, and exposure to diverse perspectives and abilities (UNESCO, 2017).

Implementing inclusive education successfully comes with various challenges, particularly in the realm of teacher training and preparedness (Pasha et al., 2021). Educators working in inclusive environments require a robust set of skills, knowledge, and strategies to adequately support students with disabilities. This entails a deep understanding of each student's distinct needs, the ability to adapt teaching methods accordingly, and the creation of a classroom environment that embraces and values diversity (Pasha et al., 2021).

Additionally, resource allocation poses a significant challenge in the context of inclusive education. Providing appropriate accommodations, assistive technologies, and support services can be resource-intensive. Schools and educational systems must allocate sufficient resources to ensure that students with disabilities receive the necessary support to thrive in inclusive environments (Salend, 2019).

Homelessness is another characteristic that significantly heightens the risk factor for students, ushering in an array of formidable challenges that cast a shadow over their educational journey and prospects. These students grapple with housing instability, enduring frequent transitions between schools, and confronting stark limitations in accessing crucial resources and support services. Consequently, these disruptive circumstances can take a substantial toll on their academic advancement and overall well-being (Masten et al., 2014). In light of these circumstances, research underscores the utmost importance of implementing targeted support services aimed at restoring stability to the educational lives of homeless students. This strategic intervention aims to counteract the detrimental repercussions of their housing insecurity on their educational pursuits. By establishing stability in their school experiences, we lay a solid foundation for their academic achievement and contribute significantly to dismantling the recurring cycle of homelessness and the associated educational disadvantages it perpetuates.

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students encounter distinctive challenges, primarily revolving around the intricacies of cultural adaptation and language acquisition within the educational context (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). These students often find themselves navigating the complex terrain of adapting to a new cultural environment while simultaneously acquiring proficiency in a language that may be unfamiliar to them. Research illuminates that one of the linchpins in fostering the academic success and overall well-being of CLD students lies in the implementation of culturally responsive teaching practices and curriculum adaptation (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This approach places a strong emphasis on recognizing and embracing the diverse cultural backgrounds and linguistic characteristics of CLD students within the classroom. It acknowledges the importance of tailoring instruction to align with their unique needs, experiences, and cultural identities. By doing so, culturally responsive teaching and curriculum adaptation become instrumental strategies for supporting CLD students throughout their educational journeys, enhancing their engagement, motivation, and their academic achievements.

In the realm of at-risk student populations, it is evident that disparities in academic achievement persist, and these disparities are often attributed to various risk factors, including socioeconomic status, English language proficiency, disabilities, and homelessness. To address these complex issues and create equitable educational opportunities, it is essential to recognize the diversity within the at-risk category and develop interventions and policies that are sensitive to the unique needs of each group. While research has shed light on the challenges faced by these students and the importance of targeted support services, there remains a need for further investigation into the specific strategies and interventions that can effectively mitigate the impact of these risk factors on students' academic outcomes. Additionally, understanding the

intersectionality of these risk factors, such as how poverty and homelessness can compound the challenges faced by students with disabilities, is an area that warrants deeper exploration. By addressing these research gaps, educators, policymakers, and researchers can work collaboratively to create more inclusive and supportive educational environments that promote the success of at-risk student populations.

Rushton's (2017) study aimed to explore K-12 teachers' perceptions of supports and strategies that could assist in enhancing the education of both at-risk and non-at-risk students. This study sought to determine the perceptions of pre-K-12 teachers of at-risk students and non-at-risk students with regard to any supports and strategies they perceive ~~that~~ will provide them with aid in their effort to improve the education of their students (Rushton, 2017). The study took place in a southeastern state school district. The participants worked in a school district that was a combination of rural as well as suburban areas. The study utilized Schlossberg's 4S Transition Theory to identify potential improvements in support and strategies for teachers working with at-risk students, aiming to facilitate their transition into educators capable of promoting positive behavioral and academic outcomes. The study's methodology involved a quantitative survey, specifically the Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education Report on Teacher Needs Survey, enhanced with additional questions by the researcher. This instrument was chosen for its validity and appropriateness in measuring teachers' perceived needs. The survey sought to compare the needs of teachers working with at-risk students to those working with non-at-risk students, hypothesizing that the former group would require more support in student social and emotional well-being and classroom management strategies.

The study underscored the critical need for differentiated supports and strategies to cater to the distinct needs of teachers working with at-risk students compared to those

working with non-at-risk students. The findings advocate for targeted professional development and resource allocation to enable teachers to better support at-risk students in achieving positive educational outcomes.

The study's population comprised approximately 4500 pre-K-12 teachers from a southeastern state's school district, with a final sample size of 329 participants after excluding incomplete surveys. The analysis used frequency statistics and MANOVA to examine differences in perceived needs between teachers of at-risk and non-at-risk students. Results indicated a significant difference in perceived needs, particularly in areas related to student social and emotional well-being and classroom management.

The study found that both groups of teachers identified a need for professional development in strategies such as classroom management, student motivation, and differentiation, among others. However, there were statistically significant differences in the emphasis on certain needs between teachers of at-risk and non-at-risk students. Specifically, teachers of at-risk students showed a higher demand for supports like additional guidance counselors, social workers, and behavior specialists. This difference underscores the unique challenges faced by teachers of at-risk students and highlights the necessity for tailored support and strategies to address these challenges effectively.

Early childhood is a critical period for cognitive, emotional, and social development. The experiences and learning that occur during these formative years lay the groundwork for future academic and life success. For at-risk children, positive early educational experiences can significantly mitigate the impact of their risk factors.

Self Determination Theory

Motivation significantly influences student engagement, persistence, and learning outcomes in education. Introduced by Deci and Ryan (1985), Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding motivation's complex

nature within educational settings. This theory suggests that meeting individuals' innate psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness is crucial for fostering intrinsic motivation and optimal functioning.

SDT is recognized for its contribution to motivation and learning in education, positing that the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fundamental to driving individuals. These needs are essential for promoting optimal motivation, engagement, and perseverance in educational contexts (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

A key aspect of SDT is the emphasis on autonomy, the need for individuals to feel volition and choice in their actions. Autonomy-supportive teaching practices, linked to increased student motivation and engagement, empower students to take control of their learning journey (Reeve, 2009). This sense of ownership can significantly enhance learning outcomes.

In the field of early childhood education, SDT's application to professional development and teacher effectiveness is gaining recognition. The theory asserts that fulfilling the needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness can boost intrinsic motivation and engagement, thereby enhancing performance and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This approach has profound implications for understanding teacher development dynamics and effectiveness in early childhood settings.

Furthermore, autonomy support within educational contexts is crucial, as emphasized by Deci et al. (1991). Teachers who support students' autonomy facilitate self-regulation and intrinsic motivation by acknowledging and nurturing students' autonomy needs. This kind of teaching practice encourages a dynamic and supportive teacher-student relationship, which is vital for effective learning environments.

SDT's examination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors sheds light on the dynamics affecting both teacher and student perseverance, especially within early

childhood education and among at-risk populations. This nuanced understanding of motivational strategies is crucial for educational outcomes, emphasizing the need to comprehend teacher motivation in creating environments where at-risk students can succeed.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of a study acts as a lens guiding the research process, interpreting the data, and providing a foundation upon which the research builds. The theoretical underpinning for this study is Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000) developed the Self-Determination Theory as a macro theory of human motivation and personality. At its core, SDT focuses on the degree to which human behaviors are voluntary or self-endorsed. The theory presents ~~between~~ diverse types of motivation based on the varied reasons or goals that lead to an action (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Self-determination theory (SDT) centers on three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, emphasizing the drive to control one's own life and align actions with one's true self; competence, the need to successfully interact with one's surroundings; and relatedness, the wish for connections with others, encompassing both giving and receiving love and care (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The choice of SDT as the guiding theory for this dissertation is rooted in its relevance to the research questions. One must delve into their motivations when seeking to understand educators' persistence journey. By examining their experiences through the lens of SDT, this study aims to gain insights into their challenges and, more crucially, what drives them to overcome those challenges and remain committed to their roles.

Summary of Findings

In reviewing the literature on early childhood education, issues contribute to teacher resilience and perseverance systems of support inside the school, systems of support outside the school, at-risk student populations, and Self Determination Theory. The literature review examines various aspects affecting early childhood educators, particularly those working with at-risk students. It delves into the significance of resilience and perseverance in teachers and how these qualities impact classroom dynamics and student engagement. The review identifies key challenges in early childhood education (ECE), including wage disparities and high turnover rates, and explores how these issues affect teacher retention and effectiveness. Furthermore, it discusses the role of support systems within schools (mentorship, professional development) and external (family, community involvement) in sustaining teacher resilience. The review also incorporates self-determination theory to understand the motivations that drive educators to work in challenging environments. This comprehensive overview sheds light on the multifaceted nature of ECE, highlighting the need for holistic support strategies to enhance educator well-being and student success.

Literature Gap

The literature gap primarily revolves around the nuanced understanding of the persistence and resilience of early childhood educators, particularly in urban and suburban settings with at-risk student populations. While existing research has delved into general challenges in early childhood education, such as wage disparities, staff turnover, and the need for supportive environments, there is a lack of in-depth exploration into the specific motivational factors and personal attributes that contribute to the perseverance of educators in these challenging environments. Additionally, the literature requires further exploration into how various support systems inside and outside

the school, including mentorship and community involvement, specifically impact teacher resilience and perseverance in early childhood education settings. This gap signifies a need for targeted research focusing on the lived experiences of these educators and their unique journeys in the profession.

Conclusion

This chapter reviewed relevant literature related to the study's purpose, which is to explore early childhood educators' unique and lived experiences, particularly their perseverance and dedication to the teaching profession amidst diverse challenges. In the following chapter, the methodological aspects of this study will be detailed, including the research purpose and questions, participant selection, data collection procedures, data analysis, triangulation of the data, representation of findings, and privacy and ethical considerations.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore early childhood educators' unique and lived experiences in the context of their perseverance and dedication to the teaching profession amidst diverse challenges. This research sought to delve deeply into the theme of tenacity, explicitly focusing on the motivating experiences and characteristics that drive these educators to persist and demonstrate commitment in their roles. By exploring these lived experiences, this study aimed to contribute valuable insights into how ECE teacher tenacity influences educational strategies and overall outcomes for at-risk student populations.

This study explored the ongoing commitment of early childhood teachers in environments serving at-risk student populations. Existing research highlighted various personal and work-related factors influencing teachers' decisions to remain in or leave their positions (Borkar, 2016; Gallant & Riley, 2014; Hall-Kenyon et al., 2013; Hoerr, 2017; Wells, 2014). Many educators face workplace challenges such as stringent guidelines, increasing administrative pressures, and a general scarcity of essential resources (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). However, as observed in the study by Moore et al. (2018), teachers in urban settings, particularly those working with Special Education and At-Risk students, demonstrate a remarkable tendency to persist in their roles. This resilience is especially pronounced among those serving the neediest student populations, suggesting a deep-rooted commitment to teaching in demanding environments. As Moore et al. reveal, the decision to stay reflects a significant dedication to their profession, often amidst various adversities. It is crucial to recognize that teachers who depart often do so due to external factors and not a lack of concern for their students. This study aimed to

uncover the critical factors that sustain teachers' morale and effectiveness, ensuring that students receive the best possible education, particularly those at risk.

Demographic data was collected from a sample of early childhood teachers of at-risk students, and teacher beliefs were collected and analyzed through semi-structured interviews. This chapter presented an overview of the research purpose and questions, methodological tradition, context, positionality, participants, data collection, data analysis, triangulation, and representation of findings.

Research Purpose and Question

The purpose of this study is to explore and examine the unique experiences of early childhood educators, particularly in the context of their perseverance and dedication to the teaching profession amidst diverse challenges. The following research questions will guide this study:

What personal and professional experiences do early childhood educators describe when teaching at-risk student populations?

What factors are perceived by early childhood educators working with at-risk student populations as contributing to their ability to continue teaching amidst challenges and setbacks?

Research Design

This research undertook a phenomenological qualitative approach. Phenomenology was chosen as the methodological framework due to its intrinsic compatibility with the nature of the research questions. While perseverance is a common trait among early childhood education teachers, its manifestation can vary widely depending on individual circumstances and the specific challenges faced in different teaching environments. This study sought to explore these varied experiences, aiming to understand how perseverance is shaped by and interacts with these diverse contexts

(Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moustakas (1994) proposed two fundamental research questions in the phenomenological approach: (a) What is your experience related to the phenomenon in question? Moreover, (b) Which events or circumstances shaped your experience with this phenomenon? Grounded in Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological approach, this study explored the lived experiences of early childhood educators working with at-risk students. The objective was to understand how these educators perceived and navigated their professional environments. This exploration informed the development of research questions focused on uncovering the educators' perspectives on the challenges they faced and their resilience and perseverance within these potentially complex educational settings.

Methodological Tradition

Utilizing a transcendental phenomenological approach, this study delved deeply into teachers' lived experiences, foregrounding their narratives and voices. This methodological tradition, rooted in Husserl's philosophical works and refined by Moustakas (1994), was particularly beneficial for this study as it allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the subjective experiences of early childhood educators. This approach was instrumental in capturing the essence of their experiences, which are often complex and nuanced (Moustakas, 1994).

Context

This study was conducted in a large elementary school in a large urban district in Southeast Texas. By focusing exclusively on elementary education, the study offered an in-depth examination of the local schooling ecosystem at this foundational level of education. The choice to concentrate on elementary schools is deliberate and aimed at understanding the unique dynamics, challenges, and opportunities present in early education settings. Focusing on one school enabled the study to delve deeply into the

specific dynamics, challenges, and opportunities unique to this setting. This concentrated approach allowed for a more detailed and immersive exploration than would be possible with a broader, multi-school focus. While acknowledging the broader educational landscape that includes middle, high, and charter schools, this study intentionally did not extend its analysis to these levels. Instead, it provided a focused lens on elementary education, standing independently without directly comparing it to other educational stages.

For this study, 'at-risk' referred to schools or educational settings. These were identified based on specific criteria such as high rates of socioeconomic disadvantage, lower academic performance indicators, or significant populations of students considered vulnerable due to socioeconomic, familial, or personal factors. The term 'at-risk' was used in this study to highlight schools where the challenges of providing quality education are compounded by these external factors, affecting both students and educators. The focus on educators in at-risk schools was deliberate. These environments often present unique challenges and pressures, which can profoundly impact the experiences and resilience of educators. The study explored how these conditions influenced teaching approaches, motivation, and perseverance. The at-risk school for this study was classified as (a) low socioeconomic status, (b) high percent of turnover rates, (c) English Language Learners (ELLs), (d) many students with disabilities, (e) notable homelessness and housing instability, (f) many culturally and linguistically diverse students, and (g) frequent school changes.

The research, scheduled for data collection in Spring 2024, was centered on a single campus that has recently seen a significant increase in the enrollment of at-risk students and was experiencing a recent change in district leadership. The rationale behind the leadership change was rooted in a desire for district-wide improvement, strategic

redirection, and response to evolving educational needs. This study primarily focused on the current state of the campus within an urban district, emphasizing the experiences of early childhood educators as they navigated the past and present educational landscape.

The current academic year represented a period of continued adaptation and evolution in educational practices and policies, reflecting the campus's ongoing challenges in serving its student population and its response to the residual impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, a global crisis that has profoundly reshaped the educational landscape (UNESCO, 2020).

The pandemic's influence extends to how schools serve their student populations, especially in addressing heightened challenges in early childhood education. Studies such as Barnett and Jung (2021) and Yoshikawa et al. (2020) have highlighted significant disruptions in ECE settings, ranging from shifts in teaching methods to altered educator-student interactions. This setting provided a rich context for exploring how early childhood educators demonstrated resilience and commitment in their roles, particularly considering the shifts and ongoing developments in the educational landscape.

Positionality

As the researcher conducting this study, I bring nine years of experience in public education, currently serving as a Special Education Department Chair. My initial three years focused on working directly with students of diverse backgrounds and needs, providing me with a deep understanding of the intricacies of supporting at-risk populations. The latter part of my career has been dedicated to advocating for services on behalf of students on my campus.

From my first day in the classroom, where I was immersed in diverse experiences and challenges. This environment highlighted the complexities that students, especially those facing language barriers and economic disadvantages, encounter. I quickly learned

that my role extended beyond academics, demanding a more profound understanding, empathy, and adaptability to meet the diverse needs of my students.

As the researcher conducting this study, my role as a Special Education Department Chair on the same campus where the participants were located presented a unique dynamic. I was acutely aware of the potential influence my professional position may have had on this study. In recognizing this, I was deeply committed to implementing robust measures to mitigate any biases and maintain the integrity of the research. This commitment involved ensuring strict confidentiality of all participant information and diligently maintaining a transparent and ethical separation between my professional responsibilities on campus and my research activities. My position did not involve administrative oversight or direct interaction with the participants in a supervisory capacity. These steps were crucial in preserving the study's objectivity and upholding the trust and confidence of the participants involved.

Participants

In this study, purposive sampling was utilized to select ten participants who were early childhood educators working with at-risk student grade levels, three to eight years old. Purposive sampling involved choosing respondents who were likely to provide the most relevant and useful information, optimizing the use of limited research resources (Kelly, 2010). This method is particularly effective in ensuring that the data collected is rich and informative, catering specifically to the research objectives (Kelly, 2010; Palinkas et al., 2015). Early childhood teachers from a large elementary school in a large urban district in Southeast Texas were invited to participate in individual interviews.

Participants were invited to participate in the study utilizing a study interest flyer, and initial screenings were conducted using Google Forms to gather demographic information and details about their teaching experience. This was crucial for

understanding the context of their responses during the interviews. The participant selection process involved contacting early childhood teachers employed full-time via their personal email addresses. To ensure the integrity and impartiality of this study, several measures were implemented to mitigate potential biases arising from the researcher's existing professional relationships with participants on campus. While the researcher worked on the same campus, the researcher's role did not involve administrative oversight or direct interaction with the participants in a supervisory capacity.

Eligibility and willingness to participate were confirmed using Google Forms, facilitating the collection of vital demographic information and details about teaching experience. This data was crucial for contextualizing interview responses. Following this, informed consent was secured in person to ensure participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, their role, confidentiality protocols, and their rights. A schedule for the interviews was arranged upon completion of the Google Form. Participation was voluntary, with a strong emphasis on maintaining confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of each interview participant, the schools, and school district in the transcribed materials.

Data Collection Procedures

Before the data collection process began, the researcher obtained approvals from the University of Houston-Clear Lake's (UHCL) Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS), as per ethical research guidelines. The research methodology incorporated interview protocols, serving both as instruments for inquiry and as a means for facilitating in-depth discussions. This approach, as outlined by Creswell (2013) and Patton (2015), is crucial in phenomenological studies that aim to capture the essence of participants' experiences concerning the study's focus.

One-on-one interviews were conducted as video conferencing meetings on Zoom, utilizing 16 open-ended, semi-structured questions. This interview format aligned with Creswell's (2013) recommendations for phenomenological research and is further substantiated by Moustakas's (1994) foundational work in *Phenomenological Research Methods*. Moustakas emphasizes the importance of open-ended questioning to deeply explore and understand the essence of participants' lived experiences. His approach to interviewing focuses on creating a space where participants can freely express their perceptions and experiences, enabling the researcher to gather rich, detailed narratives.

Each interview lasted 45-75 minutes, was recorded with the participant's consent, and subsequently transcribed. This duration was conducive to an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences, in alignment with the phenomenological focus on capturing the richness of lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). By recording and transcribing the interviews, the study ensured that the data was accurately captured and could be thoroughly analyzed, following the phenomenological tradition of seeking to understand the essence of experiences as described by the participants themselves (Smith et al., 2010).

During the interview phase, SDT guided the construction of questions to probe deeply into educators' sense of autonomy, their perceived competence in their roles, and the quality of relatedness they experienced with their students and colleagues. The aim was to understand how these core psychological needs, as outlined by Ryan and Deci (2000), influenced educators' engagement and persistence in challenging environments.

The methodological approach to these one-on-one interviews was deeply influenced by the principles of phenomenological research as established by Moustakas (1994) and Smith et al. (2010). This approach guaranteed that the interviews adhered to

the standards of phenomenological inquiry and were conducted respectfully and sensitively to the participants' experiences and narratives.

In line with Creswell's (2013) emphasis on building trust with participants, the researcher ensured clarity regarding the study's purpose and confidentiality agreements before each interview and obtained consent for recording. The interview format included both demographic inquiries and 16 semi-structured questions.

After analyzing the initial interview data, findings were shared with participants to member check, allowing them to clarify or expand upon their responses, a process supporting the research's credibility, as stated by Stahl and King (2020). The researcher securely stored all data, and the data will remain stored for the required three-year period as mandated by CPHS and federal regulations, after which it will be appropriately destroyed.

Data Analysis

After each interview, the initial step of data analysis involved epoché, which involved setting aside personal biases and preconceptions to fully engage with participants' experiences, thereby viewing the phenomenon under the study from a fresh perspective (Moustakas, 1994). This bracketing step was achieved through reflective processes, which prepared the researcher to engage with participants' experiences without preconceived notions.

The next step was to describe the 'what' or the essence of the participants' experiences. This step involved horizontalizing, which meant treating every statement as having equal value (Moustakas, 1994). Through this process, statements were categorized into themes after removing repetitive elements. Each theme was then described using participants' quotes and narratives from the interview transcripts.

The next phase involved identifying essential elements of the experience and clustering them into themes, then creating a detailed structural description for each theme. This was done using a combination of priori codes based on the theoretical framework, research questions, and emergent codes that arose from the data to categorize the themes. The themes were grouped into categories using a chart with rows and columns to represent the main and sub-themes. The researcher looked for common patterns and themes across all interviews to understand the shared essence of the participants' experiences. Any data that did not directly contribute to the research was omitted. The data was presented in a narrative format, using direct quotes from participants to illustrate each theme and maintain the authenticity of their experiences (Butina, 2015). Recognizing the limited number of participants, special attention was given to both the shared essence and the distinct differences in their experiences. This approach was crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, as it acknowledged the commonalities in their narratives while also valuing the unique perspectives each participant presented. Although reaching saturation was challenging with a smaller participant pool, this nuanced representation of shared and individual experiences provided depth and richness to the findings.

Trustworthiness

Peer reviewing was critical to ensure the accuracy and validity of the research process and findings. In this study, critical stages of the research, including the development of the interview protocol, data analysis, and interpretation of findings, were subjected to peer review. Colleagues with expertise in phenomenological research provided feedback, ensuring that the research methods and interpretations were consistent with phenomenological principles (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Efforts were made to identify and address potential research biases. Reflexive journaling was employed throughout the research process, allowing the researcher to acknowledge and reflect upon personal biases and preconceptions (Malterud, 2001; Ortlipp, 2008). Member checking was employed as a critical strategy for validating the findings. Participants were allowed to review and comment on the transcribed interviews and the emerging themes. This process ensured that the interpretations of the data were accurately reflected in the participants' experiences and perspectives (Birt et al., 2016).

As described by Geertz (1973), thick descriptions were used to present the findings. These descriptions included detailed accounts of participants' experiences, contexts, emotions, and perceptions. Such rich, detailed descriptions allowed for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and facilitated the transferability of the findings to similar contexts.

The triangulation process in this study was rigorously planned and executed. Each component, peer-reviewing, addressing research bias, member checking, and thick descriptions, contributed to a multifaceted examination of the data, ensuring robustness and depth in the research findings. Combining these strategies enhanced this study's credibility and trustworthiness, providing a complete understanding of the participants' lived experiences (Denzin, 1978).

Privacy and Ethical Considerations

The researcher ensured ethical standards were considered for this study. Prior to data collection, the researcher obtained approval from the participating school district's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the University of Houston – Clear Lake's (UHCL's) Committee for Protection of Human Services (CPHS). Before completing the one-on-one interviews, study participants reviewed and signed a consent form. The school district's name and participants' names were not mentioned in the study. Interview participants

received invitations to participate in the study via email describing the study's purpose, estimated length of each interview, disclosure that the interviews would be recorded and transcribed, and assurance that participation was voluntary and would remain confidential. The researcher used methods, such as assigning pseudonyms, to protect confidentiality during the qualitative component of the study. Participants were told their participation was voluntary and they could remove themselves from the study without repercussions. The participants were also notified that the level of risk was minimal. The data file and survey notes were stored on the researcher's computer in a password-protected file and in the researcher's office in a locked file cabinet. The data will be maintained by the researcher for five years and then destroyed.

Conclusion

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to conduct a comprehensive examination of the lived experiences of early childhood teachers who work with at-risk student populations. This research sought to delve deeply into the theme of tenacity, explicitly focusing on the motivating experiences and characteristics that drive these educators to persist and demonstrate unwavering commitment in their roles. The intent of this chapter was to describe the methodology of this qualitative study in detail. A purposeful sample of ten early childhood education teachers working with at-risk students was utilized for this study. Data was collected from semi-constructed interview questions. The data collected was analyzed to examine the unique experiences of early childhood educators, particularly in the context of their perseverance and dedication to the teaching profession amidst diverse challenges. The findings will be reported in the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the unique and lived experiences of early childhood educators, in the context of their perseverance and dedication to the teaching profession amidst diverse challenges. This research sought to delve deeply into the theme of tenacity, specifically focusing on the motivating experiences and characteristics that drive these educators to persist and demonstrate commitment in their roles. By exploring these lived experiences, this study contributes valuable insights into how tenacity influences educational strategies and overall outcomes for at-risk student populations. The two major questions that were explored were (a) What personal and professional experiences do early childhood educators describe when teaching at-risk student populations? (b) What factors are perceived by early childhood educators working with at-risk student populations as contributing to their ability to continue teaching amidst challenges and setbacks?

A phenomenological approach was used to provide a rich portrayal of the lived experiences that early childhood teachers encounter, aimed to amplify their voices and illuminate the factors influencing their perseverance and dedication in the face of adversity. In this chapter, brief descriptions of the participants of this study will be provided, including their gender, age, ethnicity, educational background, years of teaching experience, and grade level taught. Additionally, descriptions of the themes that were revealed through the interview analysis and a summary of the themes discovered are provided. Pseudonyms were used in the context of this study in order to allow the study participants to remain anonymous as well as maintain confidentiality for participation in the study.

Participants Demographics

A purposive sample of ten participants was identified as early childhood teachers of three-to-eight-year-old students who were identified as at-risk. The qualifications for the participants for this study included having at least three years of teaching experience, teaching students three to eight years old, and working at the same campus in early childhood for at least three years. To protect the confidentiality of the study participants, pseudonyms were used. The pseudonyms selected for each participant were Miranda, Andrea, Natalie, Carie, Lily, Carolyn, Nate, Jocelin, Gabriel, and Megan. A breakdown of demographics from all early childhood teachers can be found in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1:
Overview of Teacher Profile

Pseudonym	Gender	Age range	Ethnicity	Highest Level of Education	Years Teaching	Grade Level
Miranda	Female	45-54	Hispanic	Bachelors	22	Pre-k
Andrea	Female	55-64	African American	Bachelors	27	2 nd
Natalie	Female	35-44	Hispanic	Masters	15	1 st
Carie	Female	65 +	African American	Masters	49	2 nd
Lily	Female	55-64	Caucasian	Masters	25	1 st
Carolyn	Female	65+	African American	Bachelors	7	Pre-K
Nate	Male	55-64	Hispanic	Bachelors	3	2 nd
Jocelin	Female	25-34	Caucasian	Bachelors	35	Kinder
Gabriel	Female	45-54	Hispanic	Bachelors	4	1 st Grade
Megan	Female	35-44	Caucasian	Bachelors	6	Kinder

Data Collection

One-on-one interviews were conducted as video conferencing meetings on Zoom to collect qualitative data. Utilizing 16 open-ended, semi-structured questions, each interview lasted between 30 to 45 minutes, was recorded with the consent of the participants, and subsequently transcribed. Participants were solicited via a participation flyer with information and requirements for the study, and a QR code included to confirm interest in participating in the study. Once the code was scanned, participants were invited to complete a short, 5-minute questionnaire collecting demographic data and the preferred method of communication.

The researcher reached out to potential participants using the contact information provided and addressed all questions and concerns regarding the study. Interviews were then scheduled utilizing dates and times convenient for participants and consent for study participation was obtained in person. After analyzing the initial interview data, findings were shared with participants to member check, allowing them to clarify or expand upon their responses. The researcher securely stored all data, and the data will be stored for the required three-year period as mandated by CPHS and federal regulations, after which it will be appropriately destroyed.

Data Analysis

After each interview, the initial step of data analysis, the researcher utilized epoché, a step of bracketing, which involved setting aside personal biases and preconceptions to fully engage with participants' experiences. This step of bracketing was achieved through reflective processes, which prepared the researcher to engage with participants' experiences without preconceived notions.

The next step involved describing the 'what' or the essence of the experiences of the participants. Horizontalizing was used to ensure each statement represented its own

value. Each theme was then described using the study participants' quotes and narratives from the interview transcripts.

Next, the researcher identified essential elements of the participant's experiences and clustered them into themes, then created a detailed structural description for each theme. This was done by using a combination of codes based on the theoretical framework, research questions, and emergent codes that arose from the data to categorize the themes. The themes were grouped into categories using a chart with rows and columns to represent the main and sub-themes. The researcher then looked for common patterns and themes across all interviews to understand the shared essence of the participants' experiences.

Data that did not directly contribute to the research was omitted. The remaining data was then presented in a narrative format, using direct quotes from participants to illustrate each theme and maintain the authenticity of their experiences. Recognizing the limited number of participants, special attention was given to both the shared essence and the distinct differences in their experiences.

Overarching Themes

Throughout the process of analyzing the data for this study, five overarching themes were discovered to provide insights shared by early childhood teachers to offer a rich tapestry of experiences and beliefs that have shaped their careers in teaching at-risk children. The first theme was the participants' motivations and inspirations for entering the field of early childhood education. The second theme highlighted various challenges faced in the participants' careers in addition to strategies to address those challenges in order to foster positive relationships with their students. The third theme outlined personal experiences that influenced the participants' teaching styles and innovative approaches to enhance student engagement and learning. The fourth theme emphasized

the importance of ongoing professional development and resilience to provide a supportive and engaging learning environment for students. The fifth theme stressed the significance of respect for cultural and community sensitivity in their teaching approaches to create supportive learning environments for all students.

Motivation and Inspiration. Through data analysis, the first theme that emerged was the educators' motivations for entering the field of early childhood education. Participant's responses varied but often stemmed from personal experiences or influential figures in their lives. The first interview question, *Could you share a specific experience or event that led you to pursue a career in early childhood education?*, encouraged the discussion of interconnectedness of personal and professional experiences in shaping educators' motivations and inspirations. For instance, Carie was inspired by her father's career as an elementary school teacher and before entering early childhood education, taught sixth grade. She relocated to Texas, while working at an early childhood center, and working with that population motivated her to obtain her master's degree in the field of Early Childhood Education. Carie's personal value that influenced this change was centered around a cultural point of view. Carie stated, "When you have kids coming from different homes, they kind of need a culture that was different from what they had, all because what they have is what they have." Carie's background illustrated the impact of influential figures and personal experiences on educators' motivations in early childhood education.

Similarly, Miranda was studying to be an educator and had never pursued the specialization of Early Childhood. It was suggested by her professor that because times were changing and she was graduating at the age of 21, there were many risks involved with teaching high school at such a young age. He encouraged her to pursue Early Childhood and she began taking classes at the local university. Miranda stated, "I fell in

love with hands-on. I am an English Learner.” Miranda was the product of the bilingual program and questioned how she could help and how she would do it. Miranda ultimately taught at an Early Childhood center for many years before transferring to the public school sector. For Miranda, the journey into early childhood was sparked by the guidance of a professor and her personal desire to contribute to her community.

Megan, Gabriel, and Carolyn all aspired to be in early childhood education from a young age. Megan stated, “It has been a dream to be a teacher since I was a kindergartner”. When Megan was in high school, she had taken an elective course called ECP (Early Childhood Professions), and her campus also had a daycare on site for three- and four-year-olds from the neighborhood. She gained much experience by leading and assisting in a variety of lessons for the group. Gabriel’s experience stemmed from being a teacher in her previous country. She reminisced about having to work all day due to the town being small and often referring to small villages far away on the mountain. Gabriel’s experience stemmed from working with multi-grade levels, ranging from first to fifth grade. Gabriel expressed, “I would have two different classes with all of the students in one room”. She expressed that the drive behind her passion was knowing that a lot of people didn’t know how to read or write in her country.

Carolyn had similar inspirations for wanting to become an early childhood teacher. She had such a positive impact when she was very young and wanted to reciprocate that passion with students of her own. Carolyn stated “My teacher made me feel so important. She made me feel smart. She made me feel love and she inspired me to be the best that I could be, and I wanted to do that for others.” Natilie’s journey started with a different passion. Her career began as a middle school receptionist, and she then learned that her current district offered a program that would cover the cost of education. She completed the program and began her career as a teacher assistant at her current

school and ultimately changed her major to Education. Natalie expressed, “Building relationships and getting to know your students is a priority at the beginning of the school year.” Carolyn and Natalie's experiences illustrated that the journey into teaching can be ignited by impactful personal encounters with educators and facilitated by supportive educational opportunities.

Nate's experience was a testament to the influence of familial role models and the importance of positive early exposure to the teaching profession. His father's career as an elementary school teacher not only inspired him but also instilled a deep sense of responsibility towards championing children's success. Nate shared,

Since my father used to be an elementary school teacher, I always wondered why some people enjoy working with children. One day, he took me to his classroom, and then I could observe firsthand how the students wanted to learn and have fun and demanded the teacher to solve any big and little problem they would have in their young lives. These naive needs from students made me want to pursue a teaching career as a permanent alternative to my former career.

His approach to classroom management, his advocacy for children, and his innovative teaching methods, particularly in math education due to his engineering background, reflect a blend of personal influence and professional commitment.

Lily's journey into early childhood education was unexpected yet deeply influenced by her family's legacy in teaching. Her initial expedition into the field was born out of necessity, but it quickly transformed into a passion, underlined by the realization of her natural aptitude for teaching. When Lily was in graduate school, she was getting her degree in Adult Education Curriculum and Instruction. She had difficulty finding a job, so she took a job at a childcare center and discovered she was very good at it. Her mother was also a major influence since she was also a teacher. She stated how

she thinks it is common “if your mom was a teacher that you become a teacher, I think it’s kind of a common theme that family members follow the same careers.” Lily’s story illustrated how sometimes, the path chooses us, revealing hidden talents and passions that align with familial patterns of career choice.

Andrea's decision to pursue a career in early childhood education stemmed from a profound personal discovery. She stated,

An event that led me to pursue a career in early childhood education was after the death of my parents I discovered that my father was illiterate. Seeing the X on documents where there should have been a signature was very profound. I decided that I wanted to make an impact by teaching young children how to read and write.

This moving moment sparked a desire to make a significant impact on young children's lives, particularly in fostering literacy. Andrea's journey is a powerful reminder of how personal experiences can catalyze a commitment to education and the profound impact educators can have on addressing foundational learning needs.

Jocelin emphasized the role of environmental and experiential influences in shaping one's career path. Growing up in a family deeply embedded in the educational field and having hands-on experience in early childhood settings during college solidified her desire to contribute to the cognitive and emotional development of young children. Jocelin's story highlighted the cumulative effect of family influence and direct experience in the educational field.

The narratives shared by our participants Carie, Miranda, Megan, Gabriel, Carolyn, Natalie, Nate, Lily, Andrea, and Jocelin offered profound insights into the myriad motivations and inspirations that lead individuals to the rewarding yet challenging field of early childhood education. From the influential figures in their lives to pivotal

personal experiences, each story underscored the diverse and deeply personal reasons behind their career choices. These educators were moved by a common desire to make a significant impact on the lives of young learners, whether through fostering early literacy, championing children's success, or simply sharing the joy of discovery and learning in a supportive environment.

Carie, Miranda, Megan, Gabriel, Carolyn, Natalie, Nate, Lily, Andrea, and Jocelin revealed a rich tapestry of motivations and inspirations behind the pursuit of a career in early childhood education. These motivations ranged from the desire to impact future generations, as seen in Carie's cultural motivations and Andrea's discovery of her father's illiteracy, to personal fulfillment and following familial footsteps, exemplified by Lily's discovery of her aptitude for teaching and Nate's inspiration from his father's teaching career. The commonality across these narratives lies in the profound influence of personal experiences and influential figures, shaping a deep-seated commitment to nurturing young minds and contributing to their growth and development.

While each educator's journey into the field was unique, reflecting individual life events, personal discoveries, and family influences, their stories collectively underscored a shared dedication to making a meaningful difference in the lives of children. This shared commitment highlights the interconnectedness of personal motivations with professional aspirations, driving educators to overcome challenges and continuously seek professional growth.

From understanding the varied motivations that drive educators into early childhood education, it became clear that these motivations serve as the foundation upon which educators build their resilience and innovative strategies in the face of challenges. The initial spark that ignites their passion for teaching also fuels their determination to overcome obstacles and find joy and fulfillment in their work.

The next theme is built directly on the motivations and inspirations discussed. The resilience to face classroom management challenges, the adaptability to meet individual student needs, and the commitment to continuous professional growth and embracing diversity all stemmed from the same deep motivations that drew these educators to the field. The stories of innovation in teaching, the strategies for engaging diverse learners, and the collaborative efforts to enhance professional development highlighted how these educators not only navigated but persevered amidst the complexities of their profession.

Challenges and Strategies in Teaching. The second theme that emerged from the analysis of the interviews was the various challenges early childhood teachers faced in their teaching careers, such as managing diverse student behaviors, balancing curriculum requirements with individual student needs, and adapting to cultural differences in the classroom. Participants were asked *Can you recall a particular incident where you faced a significant challenge in teaching young children. How did you address and learn from this experience?*

The varied responses from the participants emphasized the importance of starting students from where they are in their learning journey. Carie mentioned the need for nurturing and understanding that children need to learn from their current level of understanding. She stated, “You kind of get this nurturing, you know. Sense of these kids’ need to learn so you have to start them from where they are.” This highlighted the significance of creating a supportive environment that caters to diverse needs and the role of differentiated instruction.

Nate acknowledged the challenges in understanding student needs due to diverse students and busy schedules but underscored the necessity of engaging with students to make a lasting impact. Nate expressed, “To fulfill this commitment, I realized that first I needed to understand what the needs from students are and try to provide supplemental

learning time for practice, work in small-group, and differentiate instruction to cover different learning styles.” Nate also emphasized, “Understanding students is difficult for me. If we understand them, we can help them grow academically, emotionally, and socially, we can see what motivates them, and what challenges they’re facing.” Nate acknowledged the challenges of understanding diverse student needs but emphasized the importance of connecting with his students.

Andrea emphasized individualized support and addressing cultural diversity, while highlighting the importance of positive relationships in managing student behavior. Andrea reflected,

A moment in my career that profoundly changed my understanding of my students’ needs was when I had students that had significant weaknesses but no recognized strengths. The students were brought to a committee for special services, and they did not qualify for special services. These students were not given an opportunity to develop; they were passed on and left in limbo, not fitting into any specialized setting or granted any additional help to access the curriculum.

She expressed that when she addresses the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of students, respect for differences is always addressed. She also stated, “The most challenging aspect of early childhood education is behavior.” She addresses behavior by developing positive relationships with her students. This begins with setting clear expectations and routines with both parent and student. By providing opportunities for students to share and learn about different cultures and norms, students become more aware and more respectful of each other.

The experience of having children who shared their school stories and struggles profoundly impacted the participant Lily, leading to a newfound sense of compassion and

empathy toward students' needs. She stated, “My children entered school age and came home and told me stories of things that happened at school and things their teachers said.” This personal realization played a pivotal role in shaping her classroom practices and interactions with students. Understanding and addressing student needs is crucial for creating a supportive learning environment. It highlights that teachers should strive to identify individual student needs and provide tailored support. This approach ensures that students receive the necessary assistance to thrive academically and emotionally.

Carolyn emphasized a significant challenge in classroom management where she initially focused on praising only the academically strong students, thereby neglecting others. This approach led to a realization that paying attention to all students, regardless of their academic performance, was crucial. The experience of adjusting the praise strategy to include all students, not just the academically strong ones, had a positive impact on student engagement. Carolyn stated,

Well, I think that the easiest way that I could explain that is that [in] my early years as a teacher, I would find myself praising only the really smart students and not, you know, paying as much attention as I should have to the other students, and I found that that was not a good idea.

She concluded by saying,

What I did was, I realized that and I found that being creative and praising the students that were not as bright made a big difference and then it made them want to do better and that became a win-win for everybody.

By recognizing and appreciating the efforts of all students, a positive change in behavior and motivation was observed. This inclusive approach fostered a supportive learning environment where all students felt valued and encouraged to perform better.

Miranda highlighted a comprehensive set of challenges faced in the realm of early childhood education, ranging from direct impacts on children to broader systemic issues. Key concerns included the negative effects of curriculum changes, such as the elimination of naps and dramatic centers, which have led to increased student difficulties and emotional distress. Miranda shared, “We’re all the problem because we’re forcing kids to do things that we know their little hands are not developed to do.” This underscores a misalignment between educational reforms and the developmental needs of young learners.

Another significant challenge Miranda identified was managing disruptive behavior in the classroom, necessitating clear expectations, positive reinforcement, and consistent discipline to maintain a conducive learning environment. Additionally, the mismatch between curriculum demands and children's developmental stages was critiqued, emphasizing the importance of developmentally appropriate practices.

Miranda also discussed the irony of increasing teacher workload and expectations, which highlights the challenge of balancing professional dedication with personal well-being. The beginning of the school year poses specific transition challenges, especially for children lacking prior quality daycare experiences, impacting their readiness and behavior.

Miranda expressed that autonomy and self-care are vital needs, with current policies around curriculum limiting teachers' flexibility to cater to individual student needs effectively. Miranda expressed financial pressures and the influence of administrative priorities over educational goals as significant systemic challenges, raising concerns about the true focus of the educational system, whether it is genuinely centered on meeting students' diverse needs or driven by financial considerations.

Miranda suggested strategies for addressing these challenges included setting clear rules for behavior management, fostering positive relationships with students and parents, and integrating technology to enhance learning experiences tailored to individual abilities. Collaboration with colleagues was also emphasized as crucial for professional development and improving student outcomes, underscoring the importance of unity and shared objectives among educators.

Megan outlined challenges she faced in classroom management, particularly during virtual teaching. Megan expressed the difficulty in keeping students engaged despite various teaching methods. She stated, “Virtual teaching tested my resilience as a teacher. It was difficult to keep students engaged with the lessons, no matter how I taught it.” Moreover, Megan mentioned the absence of effective classroom management during the virtual teaching phase, leading to minimal relationship building, especially with the students. This lack of classroom management significantly impacted the learning environment and student engagement.

Megan discussed the evolution of classroom management strategies over her career. Initially, she relied on a behavior clip chart, and ultimately recognized its limitations in promoting misbehavior among students. This realization led to a shift in approach towards more personalized and respectful methods, focusing on individual conversations and consistent expectations. Megan shared,

In the beginning of my career, I would use a behavior clip chart consistently.

About 2 years ago, I realized that it caused more misbehavior among my students because several would refuse to move their clips or would cause a scene while moving their clip.

Gabriel expressed that one significant challenge is the disparity in student abilities within the same classroom. She stated, “How one can read [but] the other one doesn't

know anything”, which highlighted the struggle faced by teachers when dealing with students at different learning levels. This diversity in academic readiness poses a tough challenge for educators in providing effective instruction tailored to each student's needs. Gabriel also expressed that one of the major challenges in classroom management is dealing with disruptive behavior. She emphasized the importance of addressing disruptive behavior promptly to maintain a conducive learning environment. Strategies such as proactive intervention and positive reinforcement were suggested to manage disruptive behavior effectively.

Gabrielle expressed a challenge of lacking parental support in classroom management. She expressed that the absence of support from parents poses a major obstacle in the educational process. This lack of involvement can hinder the overall effectiveness of teaching strategies and student development.

Additionally, Gabrielle emphasized the importance of teaching strategies in overcoming challenges in classroom management. She mentioned the significance of learning strategies, especially in mathematics education. She stated “It's so essential for them to learn strategies. So, we're working hard on that right now, especially the number bonds.” This underscored the necessity of equipping students with effective problem-solving approaches to navigate academic challenges and disruptive behavior effectively.

While exploring this theme, it became evident that these early childhood educators navigated a complex landscape of obstacles ranging from individual student behaviors to systemic educational policies. Each educator, through their unique experiences and insights, contributed to a broader understanding of the multifaceted challenges present in early childhood education and the innovative strategies employed to address them. Most of the participants expressed that the external factors that contributed

to challenges in effective classroom management revolved around developmentally appropriate practices and disparities in students' abilities.

Common among these educators was the emphasis on understanding and starting from each student's unique learning journey, reflecting a shared belief in the importance of personalized education. For instance, Carie highlighted the necessity of a nurturing approach, advocating for teaching methods that are rooted in understanding children's current developmental stages. Nate, on the other hand, focused on the challenges posed by student diversity and the need for engaging teaching methods that cater to varied learning styles, emphasizing the critical role of teacher-student connection.

A notable difference in the strategies discussed related to classroom management and the adaptation to curriculum demands. Andrea spoke to the importance of cultural sensitivity and developing strong relationships to manage student behavior effectively, contrasting with Carolyn's strategy of broadening recognition beyond academically strong students to foster an inclusive environment. This variance illustrated the spectrum of approaches educators took to create supportive learning atmospheres, from the cultivation of personal relationships to the implementation of more equitable recognition systems within the classroom.

These narratives collectively illustrated the educators' commitment to navigating the challenges they faced through strategic innovation, professional growth, and an unwavering dedication to their students. The common thread across their experiences was the recognition of starting students from where they were in their learning journey, underscoring the significance of nurturing understanding, differentiating instruction, and the role of educators as advocates for their students' success.

This next theme explored the individual philosophies and innovative methods that these educators brought to their classrooms, further enriching the understanding of the profound impact of personal experiences on teaching styles and educational outcomes.

Personal Experiences and Teaching Styles The third theme that emerged from the analysis of the interviews was that personal experiences, such as backgrounds in engineering, struggles with math, or hobbies like art and reading, influenced the teaching styles and approaches of the educators. When asked how the participants' personal life experiences shape their perspectives on early childhood education, many of the participants reflected on their personal experiences and some focused on the students they taught. Andrea related to family expressing how "being a mother first has impacted my teaching style and how I relate to my students; understanding the different stages of childhood and what it entails has been instrumental in my teaching." Andrea referred to an experience of, "knowing when a child is avoiding a task and the reasons behind it." She stressed the importance of being patient and understanding of the individual needs of students.

Similarly, Carolyn referred to herself as a nurturer. Just like Andrea, Carolyn reflected on having two children in public school and a granddaughter who keeps her "more alert." Carolyn stated, "I am able to keep up with what's going on and I am able to implement things with her and come back and implement those things to my students." Carolyn mentioned the ability to relate to children on their level being a positive aspect "in order to make the lessons you are presenting more interesting."

Natalie shared that as a bilingual student, she shares a lot with the community that she works with and "the similarities are many". Natalie had parents who were both new to this country and did not speak English. Natalie was born and raised in Houston and is also a first-generation graduate and credits those experiences to allow her to encourage

her students and “express to them how special they are for being bilingual”. Nate stated “Since I got my background in engineering, math is relatively easier for me to understand and enjoy.” This allowed him to understand and implement new learning approaches and curriculum in an “effective manner”, using well-disciplined, structured activities. Nate stated, “I can convey new curriculum and easily elicit students’ assessment data to design effective and fun lessons.”

Gabriel shared that she came from a family of four sisters and one brother, with all of them being teachers. She stated, “And like teaching is passion in my family, like my nieces, my nephews, cousins”. She talked about how education is something important to her family. Gabriel stated, “Most of us were teachers in our families and also have the opportunity, you know, to work with these people that couldn’t read or write”.

Some participants reflected on their own lives and struggles. Lily had difficulties as a child with reading and writing. She stated, “I think this gives me a better understanding, especially with math when children don’t understand.” Lily also stated that she alternates easy activities with more difficult ones stating, “always start with something that’s easy, always end with something that’s easy and in the middle be the more difficult.” Lily concluded with “I am always seeking better ways to do things”.

Carie stated, “Every little child is a grown up, and giving that child exactly what they need makes them special.” She recalled traveling back home reminiscing about students and seeing how they change. She stated, “You display what you want your students to become.”

Miranda shared her experience of working for another district and ‘bilingual was there but bilingual was like, “Let’s get bilingual money but let’s not put her in bilingual.”’ She talked about how there was no bilingual teacher, and she was an English as a Second Language (ESL) student and not truly ESL. The teacher was teaching English but most of

the students didn't speak another language. She stated, "It was a different culture." Miranda had to learn the culture and stated "It was very frustrating for me. There were no pictures, no accommodations, no nothing." She explained having to, "learn, think or swim with the textbook they tell you." She then moved to a school on the East side and at that time she stated, "It was more normally rich people that live in houses as the suburbs back then." The school now is "mostly Hispanic or third or second generation, not even first generation."

She recalled being in first grade and stated, "I had never seen Hispanic people in my life. And I was like in first grade." Miranda explained that for her, it was a culture shock. These experiences allowed for innovative approaches to math education, enhanced student engagement, and the ability to connect with students on various topics.

Additionally, the participants' experiences highlighted the significance of sharing personal experiences and backgrounds with students for their growth. Educators need to have a background or a plan that they can impart to their students. This indicates that personal growth and collaboration are intertwined, as educators can leverage their own experiences to inspire and guide students toward their own paths of development.

Across the board, educators drew significantly from their personal lives, whether from familial roles, cultural heritage, or personal academic interests to shape their teaching styles. Many participants reflected on how their past experiences, such as Gabriel's family of educators or Lily's own learning challenges, drove their current educational strategies. This showed a common trend of utilizing personal history as a resource for enhancing teaching efficacy.

There was a shared commitment to understanding and meeting students where they are, highlighted by Carie's emphasis on nurturing understanding and Nate's approach to making math accessible and enjoyable through structured activities. All educators

acknowledge the importance of catering to diverse student needs and backgrounds, emphasizing differentiated instruction and the cultivation of an inclusive classroom environment.

The educators' professional backgrounds and personal interests presented a variety of influences on their teaching styles. Nate's engineering background introduced a logical and structured approach to learning, contrasting with Lily's focus on alternating easy and challenging activities to accommodate learning difficulties. While all educators face challenges in classroom management and student engagement, their strategies for overcoming these varied. For example, Miranda navigated cultural and linguistic diversity with specific adaptations for ESL students, whereas Megan adapted her classroom management strategies over time, moving away from behavior clip charts to more personalized methods.

The degree and nature of family influence differed among participants. Gabriel was inspired by a family tradition of teaching, while Andrea and Carolyn drew directly from their experiences as a mother and grandmother, respectively, to inform their teaching approaches. Although inclusivity was a shared value, the way it manifested in teaching practices varied. Natalie leveraged her personal experience as a bilingual individual to foster linguistic inclusivity, while Andrea's revelation about her father's illiteracy shaped her focus on literacy and empathy towards students avoiding tasks.

While the participants shared a common foundation of drawing upon personal experiences and a commitment to student-centered and inclusive teaching, the specific influences on their teaching styles and the strategies they employed to address educational challenges exhibited considerable diversity. These differences enriched the educational landscape, allowing for a broad spectrum of teaching styles and approaches that cater to the varied needs of young learners. This diversity not only reflected the

multifaceted nature of teaching but also underscored the importance of personalized education in fostering effective learning environments.

While the personal experiences and teaching styles of these educators revealed the diverse influences shaping their approaches to early childhood education, the journey didn't end there. The next theme explored how these individual backgrounds and pedagogical strategies served as a foundation for continuous learning, growth, and the enduring capacity to navigate the challenges in the teaching profession. The next theme delved into the educators' commitment to evolving their practices and sustaining their passion for teaching, despite the obstacles they faced.

Professional Development and Resilience. The fourth theme that emerged from the analysis of the interviews was the importance of ongoing professional development to handle classroom diversity effectively, prevent burnout, and adapt to changes in educational practices. The evolution of classroom management is a multifaceted process that involves various perspectives and approaches. Carie, Carolyn, and Gabriel all shared similar views when it comes to classroom management. They all shared the importance of grade-level planning when it comes to sharing ideas, collaborating, and reviewing best practices when implementing the curriculum. The participants had different perspectives on the impact of professional collaboration in education and some participants aligned with the notion that collaboration positively impacts social skills and behavior of students. Collaboration also shapes the way educators approach their work.

Although this was shared as a professional development best practice, it was highlighted that opportunities persisted in working with larger grade-level teams for planning and collaboration. Carie shared the experience of working with grade level teams of more than 4, stating, “Where you have like eight for instance, you have eight first grade teachers or so, only like three or four of them might pursue what was said.”

She also went on to share. “Three might be on their own and two just don’t care.” She compared collaboration to bigger compartments that work together but one hundred percent collaboration “equalizes everything” and children can grow across the grade level. It becomes evident that the innovative use of technology plays a crucial role in enhancing teaching and learning experiences. The collaborative efforts highlighted by Carie, Carolyn, and Gabriel in grade-level planning and curriculum implementation underscore the potential for technology to further bridge gaps in communication, streamline collaborative processes, and offer dynamic resources for engaging students.

When it comes to technology, Carrie expressed that although some students can utilize technology for certain programs, success of these programs relies heavily on “teacher feedback or teacher expectations.” Carolyn also expressed the importance of collaboration with colleagues and adapting more technology in the classroom. She stated, “One thing that has changed is giving more positive reinforcement. Giving students jobs such as things as simple as line leaders.” When recalling an experience with collaboration, Carolyn stated,

One day I was having a problem with a particular student and the problem was a discipline problem. A teacher on my grade level came into the room and gave me a suggestion and I was very receptive, and it really worked out.

She went on to talk about how the teacher made suggestions on giving some students jobs and allowing them a classroom break so that they could “get some of that wiggle out of him.”

Gabriel talked about some of the positive attributes to collaborating with colleagues, stating, “I learned to be more organized. Yes, follow you know the coworkers, get ideas, try to use the same material they use that they share with me and try

to see the needs of the students.” Overall, Gabriel felt as though feedback allows organization and helps overall with classroom management for behavior.

Miranda’s approach to classroom management focuses on social-emotional. She recalled an experience she had with a student who had opportunities with following the classroom rules. The student was not willing to participate in a classroom activity and Miranda stated that the student said, “No, I don’t want to do it.” Instead of making a scene, Miranda allowed the student time to calm down and told the student, “Put it on my desk. We’ll do it later, friend.” She also recalled the importance of relationship-building with her students. She had an overall message stating, “You start learning and I think it’s not about controlling people because behavior is about consequences, and children need to learn these natural consequences and all the several stages.” When it comes to collaboration with colleagues, although she is a veteran teacher, she appreciates the fresh and new ideas of younger teachers.

Lily, Megan, and Andrea all had similar views on relying heavily on student-teacher relationships when it comes to classroom management. When it came to collaboration and professional development, Megan and Andrea agreed that collaboration with teachers was beneficial for professional development and learning new ideas and practices for the diverse needs of students. Lily stated that most of her support stemmed from administration. She stated that, “I’ve sat on a lot of committees and obviously I think every time that’s all collaboration.” She stated that she has been on several district-level committees as well as campus level and that’s where she gained the comfort of interacting with administrators in the past.

Nate relies on administration when it comes to classroom management, stating, “If students started a verbal argument in the classroom, I used to command to cool down and then remain silent without any further remedy.” Nate explained that hurt feelings and

frustration would remain in students for a long time. He expressed, “Now I reinforce internalized classroom rules and school consequences related to this kind of incident.” If the problem that occurs is a minor problem, Nate helps to lessen the student’s emotions by surveying their emotions by interviewing the students separately. If the altercation becomes physical or disruptive to classroom instruction, Nate contacts administration to prevent any immediate disruption or altercations.

Nate stated, “I try to integrate technology into the curriculum in a way that is both effective and engaging.” Nate emphasized that some of his top digital tools include “Kahoot! and Blooket.” He says that he can revisit math drills objectives and exit tickets to assess the student’s learning. Most of the other participants all varied in responses for technology use, including IXL for math, and Class Dojo for parent communication, especially to the parents of students whose home language is not the same as the language of classroom instruction.

Resilience in handling student behaviors and conflicts, and adapting classroom management strategies over time was a recurring theme, showcasing the participant’s dedication to providing a supportive and engaging learning environment for students. The integration of new educational technologies post-COVID, such as Google Drive and Kahoot, was also highlighted to enhance student learning and independence.

The participants effectively highlighted the essential balance between human elements such as personal relationships, teacher autonomy, professional collaboration, and technological advancements in fostering a conducive learning environment. It was made clear in the interview analysis that technology was not just an auxiliary tool but a central component in modern educational strategies, enhancing both teaching and learning experiences in the digital age. The integration of technology, underscored by the educators' commitment to resilience and innovative classroom management, signaled a

new era of education where digital tools play a crucial role in addressing the diverse needs of students and the professional growth of teachers.

This theme brought to light how educators like Carie, Carolyn, and Gabriel emphasized the importance of collaboration and grade-level planning to share ideas, review best practices, and implement the curriculum effectively. Their experiences demonstrated a shared belief in the power of collective effort to enhance teaching outcomes and student growth, with Carie's insights into working with larger teams illustrating the potential benefits and pitfalls of collaboration.

Across responses, there was a unanimous recognition of the importance of collaboration among educators. Sharing ideas, grade-level planning, and reviewing best practices were commonly seen as essential for enhancing teaching strategies and improving student outcomes. Educators shared a common belief in the necessity of ongoing professional development to effectively address classroom diversity, adapt to educational changes, and prevent professional burnout. This underscores a shared commitment to lifelong learning and adapting to the evolving demands of education.

There was a consensus on the importance of integrating technology into the curriculum to enhance teaching and learning experiences. Educators pointed to digital tools like "Kahoot!" and "Blooket" as examples of technology that supports engaging and effective learning. Responses highlighted resilience as a key attribute for educators, necessary for handling student behaviors, conflicts, and the challenges of adapting classroom management strategies over time.

While all educators valued collaboration, their experiences with it varied. Carie noted differences in engagement levels among colleagues in larger teams, indicating that collaboration's effectiveness can be influenced by the commitment of individual team members. Although there was a general agreement on the importance of technology, the

specifics of its application varied. Nate emphasized using technology for curriculum delivery and assessment, while others mentioned its role in communication and reinforcing positive behavior, illustrating different priorities and strategies in technology integration.

The nature of challenges faced during professional development and resilience-building efforts differed among participants. Some educators focused on external challenges like adapting to policy changes or managing diverse student needs, whereas others emphasized internal challenges like maintaining motivation and balancing work with personal care. Educators employed varied strategies to develop resilience and adapt to educational practices. For instance, some highlighted the importance of building strong relationships with students as a foundation for resilience, while others focused on the strategic use of technology and administrative support.

This next theme highlighted the importance of embracing diverse student backgrounds and fostering inclusive learning environments, underscoring how educators' understanding and respect for cultural differences further enrich their teaching practices and student relationships.

Community and Cultural Sensitivity. The fifth theme that emerged from the analysis of the interviews was the significance of community support, parental involvement, and respect for cultural differences in their teaching approaches. The interviews collectively emphasized the significance of cultural diversity and inclusivity in educational settings and organizational environments.

Carie underscored the importance of understanding and embracing diversity among students, promoting cultural awareness, role modeling positive behaviors, fostering trust in educators, emphasizing interaction, and advocating for inclusivity. She stated, “Cultural diversity and inclusivity are core values that drive innovation and

creativity within our organization.” Carie also emphasized the importance of understanding the diversity among students. She highlighted the need to recognize that children come from various backgrounds and that the focus should be on what educators can bring to them rather than imposing preconceived notions. As stated, “Well, first of all, you need to understand that these kids are diverse. And it's not about you, it's what you're gonna bring to them.”

Emphasizing the importance of understanding the diversity among students is important. It highlights the need to recognize that children come from various backgrounds and that the focus should be on what educators can bring to them rather than imposing preconceived notions.

Nate emphasized the importance of embracing cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom through a Translanguaging perspective. He stated, “I approach the variety of cultural/linguistic backgrounds by using a Translanguaging perspective. Translanguaging is a person’s fluid use of multiple linguistic resources and is part of the way multilingual learners make sense of the world.” By incorporating various languages and encouraging students to express themselves in their native tongues, educators can create an inclusive environment that respects and celebrates cultural differences. Nate stated,

In the classroom, students learn how to use names of numbers and their concept of place value in three languages at least: Spanish, English, and Japanese. This increases students’ pride and sense of unique identity and improves academic performance and integration into the American culture.

This approach involves fluidly utilizing multiple linguistic resources to help multilingual learners make sense of the world. By incorporating various languages and

encouraging students to express themselves in their native tongues, educators can create an inclusive environment that respects and celebrates cultural differences.

Andrea recounted a challenging incident where diverse students from multiple countries and cultures presented behavior issues that were initially misunderstood.

Andrea stated,

A particular incident that was challenging in my early years of teaching was behavior, struggling with the multiple behaviors that came with a class of diverse students coming from multiple countries and cultures was very challenging for a first-year teacher. I had to learn how to develop relationships with my students, things that I thought was disrespectful was not in their culture. I had to invest in PDs that assisted me with addressing cultural differences. I built positive relationships the parents as well as my students by having opportunities for them to share and talk about their culture with Friday share time.

Through professional development and investing in understanding cultural differences, Andrea was able to build positive relationships with both students and parents, fostering inclusivity and respect for diverse backgrounds.

Lily highlighted the importance of recognizing and celebrating cultural diversity within the classroom. She recounted a time during Hispanic Heritage Month when all students were invited to participate in a cultural activity. She stated, “We do Hispanic Heritage Month, where everybody made flags even if they weren't Hispanic, everybody was still able to participate, enjoyed and learned from the activity.” Carolyn referred to the use of technology as a tool to support students from diverse cultural backgrounds. She mentioned a group of students from Afghanistan who were non-English speakers. By utilizing iPads, Carolyn was able to facilitate their learning and witness significant progress in their language skills. Megan emphasized the importance of cultural diversity

and inclusivity in the classroom. She described fostering a sense of unity by treating the class as a 'family' where differences are acknowledged and respected. This approach is evident in the provision of books in various languages to cater to diverse linguistic backgrounds. She said, “As a classroom family, we spend time talking about how everyone is different and should be respected. I have a variety of books in different languages available in my classroom.” By creating an environment where students can see themselves reflected in the materials, the teacher promotes cultural understanding and acceptance.

Furthermore, Carolyn emphasized that she actively encourages students who share a common language to form friendships, recognizing the value of linguistic connections in fostering a sense of belonging and understanding. She shared, “If a student speaks the same language as another student, I give them opportunities to build a friendship to help them feel understood in our classroom.” By facilitating these relationships, she not only supports inclusivity but also creates opportunities for students to feel more at ease and supported in the classroom environment.

Natalie, as a bilingual educator, acknowledged the significance of targeting cultural diversity and linguistic backgrounds within the learning environment. She stated, “As a bilingual educator, it is imperative that I have a classroom that targets cultural diversity and linguistic backgrounds.” As a bilingual educator, Natalie acknowledged the significance of targeting cultural diversity and linguistic backgrounds within the learning environment. This is evident in her approach to assigning projects that encourage students to share about their own culture, fostering a sense of inclusivity and appreciation for diverse backgrounds. Gabriel stressed the importance of accepting and respecting differences among individuals. She highlighted that “we're all different” and that understanding and accepting these differences are crucial. Gabriel stated, “Yes, I say you

know if you know how to read and write, and you know how to count you can be somebody else in life.” Gabriel sheds light on the complexities of learning about different cultures and the need for cultural sensitivity in mentioning the challenges of vocabulary differences that can be offensive to students from other backgrounds.

Embracing diversity in the classroom, addressing curriculum requirements while meeting individual student needs, and promoting inclusivity through visual aids and gestures were key aspects of creating inclusive and supportive learning environments for all students.

All educators emphasized the importance of recognizing and embracing the cultural and linguistic diversity of their students. They acknowledged that this diversity enriches the classroom environment and supports a more holistic educational experience. There was a unanimous agreement on the need to incorporate cultural awareness into teaching practices. Activities like celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month, as mentioned by Lily, or using technology to support non-English speakers, as Carolyn did, exemplify the strategies used to honor and leverage cultural diversity.

The educators shared a common belief in the power of building positive, respectful relationships with students and their families. This was seen as foundational for creating a supportive learning environment and for addressing cultural and linguistic differences effectively. Encouraging students to express themselves and share their cultural backgrounds was a recurring theme. This approach, highlighted by Andrea’s “Friday share time,” Natalie’s classroom projects, and Megan’s inclusion of diverse books, promotes mutual respect and understanding within the classroom.

While all educators recognized the importance of linguistic diversity, their approaches varied. Nate's use of a Translanguaging perspective to incorporate multiple languages into learning contrasted with Natalie’s direct emphasis on the significance of

bilingual education. This difference underscored the range of strategies educators employ to support multilingual learners. Andrea's experience dealing with behavior issues stemming from cultural misunderstandings pointed to the challenges educators face in navigating cross-cultural interactions. Her response involved seeking professional development to better understand these differences, a strategy that may differ from other educators who might rely more on personal experience or informal learning.

The role of technology in supporting culturally and linguistically diverse students was viewed differently. Carolyn's use of iPads to aid non-English speaking students showcases a direct application of technology to address language barriers, whereas other educators might focus on technology's role in enhancing general learning or engagement without a specific focus on cultural sensitivity. Gabriel's emphasis on the acceptance and respect for individual differences highlighted a broad approach to cultural sensitivity, emphasizing a general respect for diversity. This stands in contrast to more targeted strategies, such as Carolyn's effort to connect students who spoke the same language to foster a sense of belonging.

While there are strong commonalities among educators in recognizing the importance of community support, parental involvement, and cultural sensitivity, their individual approaches and strategies reflect a diverse spectrum of practices. These differences enrich the educational experience, allowing for a broad range of culturally responsive teaching styles that cater to the varied needs of students. As we move beyond this theme, embracing community and cultural diversity not only enhances the learning environment but also prepares students for a globally interconnected world, underscoring the critical role of educators in fostering inclusivity and respect for all cultures.

Conclusion

The methods used to conduct this study are described in detail in Chapter Three. This chapter represented the experiences of ten early childhood education teachers of at-risk students three to eight years old. The results of the data analysis revealed 5 overarching themes that provided a rich understanding of the lived experiences of early childhood teachers working with at-risk students. The first theme was the participants' motivations and inspirations for entering the field of early childhood education.

The second theme highlighted various challenges faced in the participant's careers in addition to strategies to address those challenges to foster positive relationships with their students. The third theme outlined personal experiences that influenced the participants' teaching styles and innovated their approaches to enhance student engagement and learning. The fourth theme emphasized the importance of ongoing professional development and resilience to provide a supportive and engaging learning environment for students.

The fifth theme stressed the significance of respect for cultural and community sensitivity in their teaching approaches to create supportive learning environments for all students. The insights shared by the educators provided offer a comprehensive view of the challenges, strategies, motivations, and personal experiences that shape their careers in early childhood education. Chapter V will reveal the summary, implications, and conclusion.

CHAPTER V: SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore and examine the unique experiences of early childhood educators, particularly in the context of their perseverance and dedication to the teaching profession amidst diverse challenges, to contribute valuable insights regarding how tenacity influences the educational strategies and overall outcomes for at-risk student populations. The two major questions that were explored were (a) What personal and professional experiences do early childhood educators describe when teaching at-risk student populations? (b) What factors are perceived by early childhood educators working with at-risk student populations as contributing to their ability to continue teaching amidst challenges and setbacks?

This chapter provides a rich portrayal of the lived experiences that early childhood teachers encounter, aiming to amplify their voices and illuminate the factors influencing their perseverance and dedication in the face of adversity. The findings of this study agree with Deci and Ryan (2000), offering insights into the motivations, challenges, teaching styles, and the importance of community and cultural sensitivity in early childhood education. In this chapter, the summary, implications, recommendations for future studies and conclusion will be presented.

Discussion

Research question 1, *What personal and professional experiences do early childhood educators describe when teaching at-risk student populations?* was answered through the lens of inductive thematic coding from ten semi-structured interviews with early childhood educators. From the interviews, responses were categorized into three themes: (a) Motivation and Inspiration, (b) Personal Experiences and Teaching Styles, and (c) Community and Cultural Sensitivity.

Motivation and Inspiration. The theme of motivation and inspiration, as uncovered through qualitative analysis, reveals the profound influence of personal experiences and key figures on the decision of educators to embark on careers within early childhood education. This theme is deeply rooted in the educators' personal values, cultural perspectives, experiences of mentorship, and initial exposure to the teaching profession, thereby shaping their professional trajectories and career choices.

The significance of teacher resilience and perseverance, as discussed by Hiver and Dörnyei (2015) and Gu and Day (2013), echoes the intrinsic motivations highlighted by the participants. This underscores the importance of an educator's personal commitment and motivation in navigating the complexities of the educational landscape, mirroring the study's findings where personal experiences and a passion for making a positive impact on students' lives serve as key motivational drivers.

The role of supportive educational environments, as detailed in discussions on mentorship and professional development (Cumming and Wong, 2019; Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan, 2018), reflects the external influences that further shape educators' motivations. These resonate with the impact of mentorship experiences and professional development opportunities on educators' decisions to pursue and persevere in ECE careers.

The application of Self Determination Theory (SDT) by Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000) to the context of early childhood education offers a pertinent theoretical lens through which the study's motivational themes can be viewed. The emphasis on autonomy, competence, and relatedness within SDT aligns closely with the motivational factors identified among participants. This includes the pursuit of professional autonomy, the aspiration for competence through continuous learning, and the importance of fostering meaningful relationships with students.

The interconnectedness of personal motivations, the influence of supportive educational contexts, and the theoretical underpinnings of SDT collectively provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that inspire individuals to pursue and persist in the field of early childhood education.

Personal Experiences and Teaching Styles. The theme of personal experiences and teaching styles, as uncovered through qualitative analysis, explains how educators' personal backgrounds, life experiences, and individual interests significantly shape their pedagogical approaches and teaching styles. This theme emphasizes the impact of personal values, experiences, and the socio-cultural context on educators' practices and interactions with students.

The literature highlights the importance of personal experiences in the development of teaching styles, as noted in studies by Barni et al., (2019), which explored the correlation between personal values, motivations, and self-efficacy in teaching. This aligns with the findings from the interviews, where educators drew directly from their experiences as parents to inform their teaching methods, demonstrating the profound influence of personal life on professional practice. Such connections underline the significance of personal values and experiences in shaping educators' approaches to teaching, resonating with the notion that educators' personal backgrounds can deeply influence their teaching styles and interactions with students.

The narratives of educators with a background in engineering, and another educator who had difficulties with reading and writing, illustrate the diverse ways in which personal experiences and academic backgrounds influence teaching methodologies. This diversity in experiences enriches the educational environment, allowing for a variety of teaching styles that cater to the diverse needs of students.

The concept of culturally responsive teaching and the importance of acknowledging and leveraging the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of both teachers and students, as discussed in the literature by Suárez-Orozco et al. (2010) and Ladson-Billings (1995), further supports the findings. The educators who shared their bilingual backgrounds and cultural experiences, highlight the crucial role of educators' personal narratives in enhancing their ability to connect with and teach students from similar or diverse backgrounds. This aspect of personal experiences enriching teaching styles is a testament to the critical role of cultural and linguistic diversity in shaping effective and engaging pedagogical approaches.

In conclusion, this theme underscored the interconnectedness of educators' personal histories, cultural backgrounds, and professional practices. This synthesis of qualitative findings illustrates the multifaceted nature of teaching, where personal experiences not only inform but also enhance educators' pedagogical strategies, contributing to a rich, diverse, and responsive educational landscape. This further confirms that educators' personal journeys are integral to their teaching philosophies, methodologies, and their ability to make meaningful connections with their students.

Community and Cultural Sensitivity. The theme of Community and Cultural Sensitivity, as uncovered through qualitative analysis, explains that teaching approaches find strong resonance with the emphasis on the necessity of culturally responsive teaching and engagement with at-risk student populations. This theme is crucial for understanding how educators navigate the complex interplay of cultural diversity, community engagement, and educational practices to foster inclusive and supportive learning environments.

The significance of cultural and community sensitivity in educational settings is underscored by studies such as Rumberger (2015) and Duncan & Murnane (2014), which

highlight the critical need for educational practices to be deeply rooted in an understanding of cultural and community contexts. This aligns with the findings from the interviews, where educators emphasized the importance of embracing cultural diversity and implementing a translanguaging approach to support multilingual learners. These approaches reflect a commitment to inclusivity and a recognition of the rich linguistic resources that diverse student populations bring to the classroom, mirroring the literature's advocacy for educational environments that respect and celebrate cultural differences.

One educator's experience with behavior issues among culturally diverse students illustrates the challenges and learning opportunities presented by a multicultural classroom. Her efforts to understand cultural differences and invest in professional development to build positive relationships with students and parents echo the literature's emphasis on the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy. This approach, as highlighted by Suárez-Orozco et al. (2010) and Ladson-Billings (1995), is essential for educators to effectively address the unique needs of at-risk student populations and foster a sense of belonging and respect among all students.

Some educators' initiatives to celebrate cultural diversity through classroom activities and the provision of multilingual materials further exemplify the practical applications of culturally responsive teaching. These strategies not only enhance student engagement and learning but also contribute to a classroom culture that values and learns from cultural diversity. Another educator's use of technology to support non-English speaking students from Afghanistan and her efforts to encourage friendships among students sharing a common language demonstrate the potential of innovative and thoughtful approaches to meet the diverse needs of students. These practices reflect the discussion on the importance of acknowledging and leveraging the cultural and linguistic

assets of students to enhance their educational experience and sense of belonging in the classroom.

In conclusion, this theme highlighted the indispensable role of culturally responsive teaching in addressing the needs of at-risk student populations. The educators' narratives provided compelling evidence of the impact of cultural and community sensitivity on teaching approaches, underscoring the need for educational practices that embrace diversity, promote inclusivity, and respect the unique backgrounds and experiences of all students.

Research question 2, *What factors are perceived by early childhood educators working with at-risk student populations as contributing to their ability to continue teaching amidst challenges and setbacks?* was answered through the lens of inductive thematic coding from ten semi-structured interviews with early childhood educators. From the interviews, responses were categorized into three themes: (a) Challenges and Strategies in Teaching, (b) Professional Development and Resilience, and (c) Community and Cultural Sensitivity

Challenges and Strategies in Teaching Participants noted significant challenges in early childhood education, such as managing diverse student behaviors, balancing curriculum requirements with individual needs, and adapting to cultural differences in the classroom. One participant's approach to starting students from where they are in their learning journey reflects the necessity of differentiated instruction and creating a supportive environment that caters to diverse needs (Rushton, 2017). Similarly, another educator's emphasis on understanding student needs and providing individualized support aligns with the literature's call for engaging with students to make a lasting impact, acknowledging the complexity of understanding diverse student needs amidst busy schedules (Rumberger, 2015; Duncan & Murnane, 2014).

One educator's focus on individualized support and addressing cultural diversity through positive relationships underscored the significance of respecting differences and setting clear expectations and routines (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Another experience that aligned with research studies, highlighted the importance of empathy and understanding student needs, aligning with the literature's emphasis on creating supportive learning environments tailored to individual students (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). Additional findings from the interview analysis implicated that a shift in praising strategies to include all students, recognizing the importance of paying attention to every student regardless of academic performance, mirrors Liu et al.'s (2023) discussion on fostering a positive and inclusive learning environment.

Professional Development and Resilience. The theme of professional development and resilience in the context of early childhood education emphasizes the importance of ongoing training to handle classroom diversity effectively, prevent burnout, and adapt to changes in educational practices. Educators shared views on the importance of grade-level planning and collaboration for curriculum implementation and classroom management that are echoed in the literature, highlighting the value of professional development best practices (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2022; Herman, Dearth-Wesley, & Whitaker, 2023).

The significance of embracing technology and positive reinforcement strategies, as mentioned by an educator, aligns with the literature's insights on the evolution of classroom management through innovative approaches (Kraft, Blazar, & Hogan, 2018; Stern et al., 2021). Furthermore, the emphasis on collaboration with colleagues and the integration of new educational technologies to enhance student learning resonates with the literature's discussion on the critical role of professional development and resilience

in improving educational outcomes and teacher effectiveness (Bayly et al., 2022; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Community and Cultural Sensitivity. The significance of community support, parental involvement, and respect for cultural differences in teaching approaches is a pivotal theme, aligning with the literature on the importance of culturally responsive teaching and addressing the unique needs of at-risk student populations. The educator's emphasis on understanding and embracing diversity among students and promoting cultural awareness and inclusivity is supported by studies emphasizing the need for educational practices that are sensitive to cultural and community contexts (Rumberger, 2015; Duncan & Murnane, 2014).

The focus on embracing cultural and linguistic diversity through a Translanguaging perspective aligns with the literature's call for creating inclusive environments that respect and celebrate cultural differences (Gándara & Rumberger, 2009; August & Shanahan, 2006). The educator's recounting of a challenging incident and the investment in professional development to address cultural differences illustrates the literature's emphasis on fostering inclusivity and respect for diverse backgrounds (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). The practices of celebrating cultural diversity within the classroom, and the use of technology to support students from diverse cultural backgrounds, demonstrate the research discussion on the importance of acknowledging and leveraging cultural and linguistic assets to enhance the educational experience and sense of belonging (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In conclusion, early childhood educators perceive differentiated instruction, professional development, collaborative practices, and culturally responsive teaching as key factors contributing to their ability to continue teaching amidst challenges and setbacks. These strategies emphasize the importance of personalized support, resilience

through continuous learning, and sensitivity to cultural and community contexts in effectively teaching at-risk student populations.

The thematic analysis of ten semi-structured interviews revealed five overarching themes: Motivation and Inspiration, Challenges and Strategies in Teaching, Personal Experiences and Teaching Styles, Professional Development and Resilience, and Community and Cultural Sensitivity. These themes underscore the interplay between personal motivations, the impact of professional experiences, and the significance of a supportive teaching environment in fostering educator resilience and perseverance.

Connection to Theoretical Framework

This study's themes resonated deeply with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), explaining the fundamental roles of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the professional lives of educators. The narratives of educators entering the teaching profession unveiled a compelling drive towards autonomy, choosing a path aligned with their values and aspirations. Competence was reflected in their desire to effect change and demonstrate efficacy in the lives of others, while relatedness emerged through influences from significant figures and the aspiration to forge impactful connections with students (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

These educators encountered various classroom challenges that necessitate adaptive strategies, ensuring their effectiveness in fostering learning environments. This quest for competence was evident in their ongoing efforts to refine their teaching approaches to meet their students' diverse needs. The cultivation of positive relationships and collaborative practices underscored the relatedness component, fostering a supportive educational community among teachers and students alike (Reeve, 2009).

The autonomy aspect of SDT was highlighted by educators' utilization of personal experiences to inform their unique teaching methodologies. Drawing from their

backgrounds and past challenges, they exercised autonomy in their pedagogical choices, enhancing their competence with innovative teaching strategies. This personalization of teaching not only aided in connecting with students on relatable levels but also strengthened the bond of relatedness within the educational context.

Professional growth and resilience underscored the continuous pursuit of competence. Educators' commitment to professional development, adaptation to new technologies, and the development of classroom management strategies showcased their dedication to enhancing their teaching capabilities. Resilience, manifesting through perseverance and growth amidst challenges, reflected a profound level of autonomy. It also fostered relatedness by building supportive networks among colleagues, enhancing the educational experience for both teachers and students.

The emphasis on embracing diversity and inclusivity within educational settings illustrated the relatedness component of SDT. By striving to create inclusive environments, educators address the need for all students to feel recognized and valued, fostering a sense of belonging. This effort not only showcases competence in meeting the varied needs of students but also highlights the educators' autonomous choice to incorporate diverse cultural perspectives into their teaching (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

The alignment with SDT underscored the importance of understanding the motivations, challenges, and adaptive strategies of educators, particularly those working with at-risk student populations. It revealed the complex relationship between educators' psychological needs and their professional practices, offering valuable insights into the factors that sustained their perseverance and enhanced their effectiveness in early childhood educational settings.

Limitations

One of the primary limitations of this study is its reliance on a relatively small and possibly homogenous sample. While efforts were made to include educators from various backgrounds and settings, the scope and diversity of the sample may not fully represent the wide range of experiences and perspectives found in early childhood education across different geographic and socioeconomic contexts. This limitation restricts the ability to generalize the findings to all early childhood educators working with at-risk populations.

Implications

The study's findings underscore the necessity of adopting differentiated instruction and a deep understanding of students' cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Educators should be trained to tailor their teaching strategies to meet the diverse needs of at-risk students, recognizing and starting from the students' current levels of understanding. This approach not only supports academic achievement but also fosters a supportive environment that caters to diverse needs.

Implications for Professional Development.

The study highlights the importance of collaborative planning and shared learning experiences in building educator resilience (Goddard, Goddard, & Tschannen-Moran, 2007). Educational institutions should foster environments that encourage peer mentorship, collaborative problem-solving, and sharing of best practices. This not only supports professional growth but also contributes to a resilient teaching force capable of navigating the complexities of educating at-risk populations.

Effective use of technology in teaching is identified as a vital tool for managing classroom diversity and enhancing learning experiences (Higgins, Xiao, & Katsipataki, 2012). Educator training should incorporate the use of digital tools and platforms that

support differentiated instruction and facilitate communication with diverse families, preparing teachers to effectively integrate technology into their pedagogical practices.

Policy and Educational Leadership.

Educational leaders and policymakers are called to support policies that promote culturally responsive teaching practices (Gay, 2010). This includes allocating resources for professional development in cultural competence and incentives for schools demonstrating excellence in inclusive practices. The role of community support and parental involvement is crucial in enriching the educational experiences of at-risk students (Epstein, 2011). Policies should encourage and facilitate partnerships between schools, families, and community organizations, adopting a holistic educational approach that extends beyond the classroom. This could manifest as increased funding for schools that excel in integrating culturally responsive materials into their curriculum or creating community engagement programs that bring together educators, families, and local organizations to support at-risk students' learning and development.

Implications for Practice.

Implement targeted professional development programs that focus on building resilience among early childhood educators. Such programs should incorporate strategies identified by Hiver and Dörnyei (2015) and Gu and Day (2013), emphasizing the dynamic process of cultivating resilience and the importance of perseverance in educational contexts. These strategies include: (a) creating a supportive learning environment for teachers, (b) fostering a growth mindset, (c) building professional competence, (d) promoting autonomy and empowerment, and (e) cultivating emotional intelligence and social support and implementing reflective practices.

Initiatives focusing on resilience could include workshops on emotional intelligence, reflective teaching practices, and building social support networks among

educators. A professional development (PD) program based on resilience, inspired by the findings of Goddard, Goddard, & Tschannen-Moran (2007), would prioritize collaborative planning, peer mentorship, and shared learning experiences to foster educator resilience. The sessions would include discussions where educators work together to design lesson plans, address classroom challenges, and develop strategies to support at-risk students. These workshops would encourage the sharing of diverse perspectives and solutions, enriching the learning experience for all participants.

Experienced teachers would be paired with newer educators to provide guidance, support, and advice. This relationship fosters a culture of continuous learning and mutual support, helping less experienced teachers navigate the challenges of the profession with resilience. These sessions would follow up with regularly scheduled meetings where educators present successful strategies, innovative teaching methods, and case studies of overcoming classroom challenges.

Sessions would emphasize interactive activities, role-playing, and reflective exercises to help educators internalize the principles of resilience. Technology would be implemented by leveraging digital tools and platforms to facilitate collaboration, communication, and the sharing of resources. Online forums, shared digital workspaces, and virtual meetings can extend the reach of the PD program, allowing for greater flexibility and accessibility. Ongoing support would be provided through regular check-ins, feedback sessions, and follow-up workshops to reinforce learning and address emerging challenges.

Advocate for policy changes to address the wage disparities in early childhood education, as highlighted by Liu et al. (2023). Ensuring equitable compensation is crucial for the recruitment and retention of high-quality professionals, thereby directly impacting the educational outcomes of at-risk student populations.

Foster stronger collaboration between schools, families, and community organizations to build comprehensive support systems for at-risk students. The importance of family and community involvement, as discussed by Adams et al. (1996), underscores the need for a holistic approach to supporting at-risk student populations.

Collaboration can be implemented by strengthening the partnership between educators and families of at-risk students through interactive workshops. These sessions could focus on understanding the educational system, strategies for supporting learning at home, and the importance of cultural and linguistic diversity in education. Teachers and parents will be able to come together to learn about culturally responsive teaching practices. Sessions could involve parents sharing stories about their cultural backgrounds and discussing how these can be integrated into the classroom to make learning more relevant for CLD and ELL students.

Integrate culturally responsive teaching practices and curriculum adaptation to support culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students and English language learners (ELLs). This approach, based on the work of Ladson-Billings (1995) and August & Shanahan (2006), recognizes the importance of aligning instruction with students' unique backgrounds and needs. These practices can be implemented by developing and selecting teaching materials that reflect the cultural diversity of student populations. This practice could include literature, historical examples, case studies, and visuals that represent a variety of cultures, languages, and experiences.

For multilingual students, resources can be provided in multiple languages to accommodate ELLs and encourage multilingualism as a classroom asset. This would include translating key materials, offering bilingual books, or using digital tools that support language learning. Adopting teaching methods that are responsive to the cultural backgrounds of students will also be beneficial. This includes creating learning activities

that draw on students' cultural experiences, encouraging students to share their own stories and perspectives, and incorporating cultural practices into the learning process.

Implement inclusive education strategies to support students with disabilities, ensuring that these students have access to a supportive and accommodating learning environment (Salend, 2019). Apply principles from Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to enhance teacher motivation and engagement. Professional development initiatives should focus on fulfilling teachers' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, thereby fostering a more resilient and motivated teaching workforce (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Bayly et al., 2022).

Workshops can be offered that teach educators how to design and implement instruction that meets the diverse needs of all students, including those with disabilities. This includes using a variety of teaching methods, materials, and assessments to accommodate different learning styles and abilities. In these sessions, teachers can be educated on relevant special education laws, policies, and ethical considerations to ensure they understand their responsibilities and the rights of students with disabilities.

Educators would use real-life scenarios and role-playing exercises to help them practice responding to various classroom situations, promoting empathy, and understanding of students' experiences. Sessions can be included that focus on each of the three basic psychological needs identified by SDT. For autonomy, strategies can be explored that allow teachers to have more control over their teaching methods and classroom management. For competence, opportunities for skill development and mastery in inclusive education techniques can be offered. For relatedness, team-building activities and discussion groups that foster a supportive community can be facilitated among educators. Teachers will be guided in setting personal and professional goals that

align with their values and aspirations, fostering a sense of purpose and direction in their teaching careers.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should consider conducting longitudinal studies to track the development of resilience and perseverance among early childhood educators over time. This approach would provide insights into how these qualities evolve in response to professional development interventions and changing educational landscapes. A longitudinal design would allow researchers to observe the long-term effects of targeted resilience-building programs and their impact on teacher retention and effectiveness, especially in high-need areas.

It would also be beneficial to conduct comparative studies that examine teacher resilience and perseverance in various educational settings, including urban, suburban, and rural contexts. This research could employ a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative measures of teacher well-being and job satisfaction with qualitative interviews to capture the nuanced experiences of educators across different environments. Such studies would help identify unique challenges and supports needed in each context, informing more tailored approaches to professional development and support.

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the unique lived experiences of early childhood educators, particularly focusing on their perseverance and dedication in teaching at-risk student populations amidst various challenges. Through in-depth interviews with ten early childhood educators, this study illuminated the personal and professional experiences that shape their teaching practices, as well as the factors perceived as contributing to their ability to continue teaching amidst challenges and setbacks.

The analysis of interview responses revealed five overarching themes: (a) Motivation and Inspiration, (b) Challenges and Strategies in Teaching, (c) Personal Experiences and Teaching Styles, (d) Professional Development and Resilience, and (e) Community and Cultural Sensitivity. These themes highlight the complex interplay of personal motivations, the impact of professional experiences, and the significance of a supportive teaching environment in fostering resilience and perseverance among educators.

Educators described various motivations for entering the field, with many citing personal experiences or influential figures as key drivers. Challenges faced in their careers were met with innovative strategies to foster positive relationships and enhance student engagement. Personal experiences and backgrounds significantly influenced their teaching styles, underscoring the importance of personal growth and collaborative learning. The theme of professional development and resilience emphasized the need for ongoing training to navigate classroom diversity effectively and prevent burnout. Lastly, the significance of cultural and community sensitivity in teaching approaches was highlighted, demonstrating the importance of inclusive and supportive learning environments for all students.

The study's implications for practice suggest the need for targeted professional development programs focusing on building resilience, advocating for policy changes to address wage disparities in early childhood education, fostering collaboration between schools, families, and community organizations, integrating culturally responsive teaching practices, implementing inclusive education strategies, and applying principles from Self-Determination Theory to enhance teacher motivation and engagement.

Recommendations for future research include conducting longitudinal studies to track the development of teacher resilience and perseverance over time, and comparative studies examining teacher resilience in various educational settings.

In conclusion, this study contributes valuable insights into the factors that motivate and sustain early childhood educators in their commitment to teaching at-risk student populations. It underscores the critical role of resilience, professional development, and a supportive educational environment in enhancing educational outcomes for at-risk students. The findings offer guidance for developing strategies and policies aimed at supporting educators in their vital role, ensuring that all children have access to high-quality education that meets their diverse needs.

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APPENDIX A:
INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

Greetings! You are invited to participate in a research study focused on the perseverance and dedication of early childhood educators particularly those working with at-risk student populations. The study aims to uncover the unique experiences and motivating factors that drive educators to continue their invaluable work despite various challenges. Your insights and experiences are crucial to understanding the depth of tenacity in the teaching profession. Your participation will be instrumental in highlighting the dedication and commitment required to educate at-risk students effectively. Your involvement will include a brief online questionnaire, followed by a 45-75 minute in-depth interview. Rest assured, your responses will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and respect. Your participation is voluntary, and your insights will be invaluable in shaping strategies to support and empower educators in similar roles. Thank you for considering this invitation. To express interest in participating, please scan the QR code at the bottom of this page. For more information or questions, please contact Dr. Jennifer Grace at grace@uhcl.edu or myself at thompsonm0223@uhcl.edu.

APPENDIX B:
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Could you share a specific experience or event that led you to pursue a career in early childhood education?

Can you recall a particular incident where you faced a significant challenge in teaching young children? How did you address and learn from this experience?

What personal belief or value has most strongly influenced your approach to early childhood education, and can you give an example of how this has manifested in your classroom?

Can you describe a moment or event in your career that profoundly changed your understanding of your students' needs?

Please share a specific experience that tested your resilience as an early childhood educator and how you coped with it.

Could you provide an example of a time when you had to balance the curriculum requirements with the individual needs of a student? How did you manage this?

How has your approach to classroom management changed over the years? Can you give an example of a strategy you have adapted or changed?

Can you share an instance where collaboration with colleagues significantly influenced your professional practice or benefited your students?

Can you discuss a specific new educational technology or method you have integrated into your teaching? What was the process and outcome?

How do you approach the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of your students in practice? Could you share an example?

What specific aspect of early childhood education do you find most challenging, and how do you address it?

What specific factors or experiences have motivated you to continue working in the field of early childhood education and particularly in your current district?

If you could implement one significant change in the educational system to better support teachers, what would it be?

Can you share a personal hobby or interest that enriches your life? How does this hobby or interest influence your approach to teaching?

How do your personal life experiences shape your perspective and methods in early childhood education? Can you give an example of an experience that significantly impacted your teaching style or how you relate to your students?

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

APPENDIX C:
INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT: ADULT RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

You are being asked to participate in the research project described below. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate, or you may decide to stop your participation at any time. Should you refuse to participate in the study, or should you withdraw your consent and stop participation in the study, your decision will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled. You are being asked to read the information below carefully and ask questions about anything you don't understand before deciding whether or not to participate.

Title: Navigating Challenges with Tenacity. Examination of Early Childhood Teachers Perseverance for At-Risk Students.

Principal Investigator(s): Monica Thompson

Student Investigator(s): Monica Thompson

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Jennifer Grace

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to explore and examine the unique experiences of early childhood educators, particularly in the context of their perseverance and dedication to the teaching profession amidst diverse challenges. The following research questions will guide this study: 1 What personal and professional experiences do early childhood educators describe when teaching at-risk student populations? 2. What factors are perceived by early childhood educators working with at-risk student populations as contributing to their ability to continue teaching amidst challenges and setbacks?

Procedures: The research procedures are as follows: Participants will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interviews via Zoom, in which all interviews will be recorded and transcribed. The interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. Questions are open ended which allows for early childhood teachers adequate time for quality responses. Pseudonyms will be used in order for participants to remain anonymous and interviews will be kept confidential.

Expected Duration: February 14, 2024 – June 2, 2024

Risks of Participation: N/A

{Many of the studies performed by UHCL faculty or students do not involve physical risk, but rather the possibility of psychological and/or emotional risks from participation. The principles that apply to studies that involve psychological risk or mental stress are similar to those that involve physical risk. Participants should be informed of any foreseeable risks or discomforts and provided contact information of professional agencies (e.g., a crisis hot line) if any treatment is needed.}

Benefits to the Subject

There is no direct benefit received from your participation in this study, but your participation will help the investigator(s) to better understand early childhood experiences that contribute to resilience and perseverance with at-risk students 3 to 8 years old.

Confidentiality of Records

Every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of your study records. The data collected from the study will be used for educational and publication purposes, however, you will not be identified by name. For federal audit purposes, the participant's

documentation for this research project will be maintained and safeguarded by the Principal Investigator or Faculty Sponsor for a minimum of three years after completion of the study. After that time, the participant's documentation may be destroyed.

Compensation

There is no financial compensation to be offered for participation in the study. {For research involving more than minimal risk, an explanation as to whether any compensation and an explanation as to whether any medical treatments are available if injury occurs and, if so, what they consist of, or where further information may be obtained.}

Investigator's Right to Withdraw Participant

The investigator has the right to withdraw you from this study at any time.

Contact Information for Questions or Problems

The investigator has offered to answer all of your questions. If you have additional questions during the course of this study about the research or any related problem, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Monica Thompson by telephone at 713-277-5622 or by email at thompsonm0223@uhcl.edu

{Or, Student Researcher information}

If you have additional questions during the course of this study about the research or any related problem, you may contact the Student Researcher, Monica Thompson by telephone at 713-277-5622 or by email at thompsonm0223@uhcl.edu The Faculty Sponsor, Dr. Jennifer Grace may be contacted by telephone at 504-292-6676 or email at Grace@uhcl.edu

Identifiable Private Information *(if applicable)*

Identifiers might be removed from identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens and that, after such removal, the information or biospecimens could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent from the subject or the legally authorized representative, if this might be a possibility.

OR

Information or biospecimens collected as part of the research, even if identifiers are removed, will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

Signatures

Your signature below acknowledges your voluntary participation in this research project. Such participation does not release the investigator(s), institution(s), sponsor(s) or granting agency(ies) from their professional and ethical responsibility to you. By signing the form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

The purpose of this study, procedures to be followed, and explanation of risks or benefits have been explained to you. You have been allowed to ask questions and your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. You have been told who to contact if you have additional questions. You have read this consent form and voluntarily agree to participate as a subject in this study. You are free to withdraw your consent at any time by contacting the Principle Investigator or Student Researcher/Faculty Sponsor. You will be given a copy of the consent form you have signed.

Subject's printed name: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

Signature of Subject: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

Date: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

Using language that is understandable and appropriate, I have discussed this project and the items listed above with the subject.

Printed name and title: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

Date: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON-CLEAR LAKE (UHCL) INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) HAS REVIEWED AND APPROVED THIS PROJECT. ANY QUESTIONS REGARDING YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH SUBJECT MAY BE ADDRESSED TO THE UHCL IRB (281-283-3015). ALL RESEARCH PROJECTS THAT ARE CARRIED OUT BY INVESTIGATORS AT UHCL ARE GOVERNED BY REQUIREMENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT. (FEDERALWIDE ASSURANCE #FWA00004068)