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The Role of Professional Relationships in Early Childhood Special Education
Practitioners' Resilience: A Phenomenological Investigation

By

Kimberly Barbara Knodel

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Joint Doctor of Philosophy
with San Francisco State University

in

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of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Susan Holloway, Co-Chair
Professor Amber Friesen, Co-Chair
Professor Jill Duerr Berrick

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Abstract

The Role of Professional Relationships in Early Childhood Special Education Practitioners' Resilience: A Phenomenological Investigation

by

Kimberly Barbara Knodel

Joint Doctor of Philosophy in Special Education

University of California, Berkeley and San Francisco State University

Professors Susan Holloway and Amber Friesen, Co-Chairs

The field of early childhood special education faces a significant teacher shortage that is in need of solutions (Bruder, 2010; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). An unaddressed area of examination in resilience research is the role that professional relationships play in enhancing teacher resilience, career longevity, and job satisfaction. This dissertation details a phenomenological qualitative study that explores relational resilience in early childhood special education practitioners. Qualitative methods included a demographics and resilience questionnaire and in-depth interviews. These methods offered a better understanding of the phenomenon of relational resilience in early childhood special education practitioners. Implications for research, theory, and practice are discussed.

Keywords: relational resilience, teacher resilience, teacher shortage, teacher wellness, early childhood special education

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	i
LIST OF TABLES	v
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Teacher Shortages in Special Education.....	1
Understanding Teachers’ Resilience.....	2
Researcher’s Perspective	3
Theoretical and Conceptual Framework.....	4
Risk and Resilience Theory	4
Teachers’ Resilience.	5
Relational Resilience	5
Purpose of Study.....	7
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW	8
Research on Teachers’ Resilience	8
Teachers’ Resilience Applied to Special Education	11
Relational Resilience Applied to Education.	12
Relational Resilience Applied to Early Childhood Special Education.....	14
Rationale for This Study	15
CHAPTER III: METHODS.....	16
Overview of Research Design	16
Methods Overview.....	16
Pilot Study.....	17
Researcher Role, Bias, and Subjectivity	17
Measures	18
Demographics and Resilience Questionnaire	18
Interview Protocol.....	18
Participant Recruitment	19
Interview Participants	20
Professional Background and Experiences	21
Interview Procedure	23
Data Analysis	23
Trustworthiness.....	26
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS.....	28
Factors Influencing Relational Resilience in ECSE Practitioners	28
Motivation for Working with Children and Families	28
Experiencing Stress.....	29
ECSE Practitioners’ Experiences of Relational Resilience	30
Mutual Empathy.....	30
General Sense of Caring	31
Communication.....	31
Receiving Helpful Advice.....	31

Receiving Direct Assistance	32
Teaching and Learning from Each Other	32
Development of Courage	33
Empowerment	38
Factors That Promoted ECSE Practitioners' Resilience	40
Shared Personal Characteristics	41
Friendship Outside the Workplace	42
Factors That Undermined ECSE Practitioners' Resilience	43
Personal Characteristics	43
External Factors	44
Lack of Training.	44
Inconsistent Classroom Leadership	44
Difficult Scheduling	45
Summary of Results	45
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION	47
Introduction	47
Interpretation of Findings	47
Contextual Factors Influencing ECSE Practitioners' Relational Resilience	73
Features of Professional Relationships in ECSE Practitioners	48
Key Factors of Professional Relationships that Promote ECSE Practitioners' Resilience	50
Key Factors of Professional Relationships that Undermined ECSE Practitioners' Resilience	51
Limitations of Study	52
Implications for Theory and Research	53
Implications for Practice	54
Conclusion	56
REFERENCES	57
APPENDIX A. Codebook and Coding	68
APPENDIX B. Demographics and Resilience Questionnaire	72
APPENDIX C. Interview Protocol	74

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
Table 1 – Demographic Characteristics of Interview Participants	20
Table 2 – Interview Participants’ Professional Background and Experiences	22
Table 3 – Table of Research Questions and Overarching Themes	24

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

“But when I do feel tired, it's just helpful when I have someone to chat with or just talk it out with. So my special education teacher, we do that a lot. She'll tell me when she's having a hard time, or I'll tell her when I'm having a hard time, and we'll just chat about it after the kids leave.” - Karissa, Early Childhood Special Educator

The shortage of qualified teachers is acute. A recent analysis of national databases by Sutscher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas (2019) predicted an estimated annual shortage of 112,000 unfulfilled teaching positions during the 2017-2018 school year. The same review estimated that 109,000 individuals were uncertified for their teaching positions in 2017. The shortage extends to teacher preparation programs as well, with nearly a third fewer teacher candidates enrolling in teacher preparation programs during the period from 2009 to 2014 compared to previous years (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2019). The teacher shortage is most acute in the fields of mathematics, science, and special education, and disproportionately impacts traditionally marginalized students including those from low-income families, students of color, and students with disabilities as well as those living in inner city and rural environments (Carver-Thomas, 2021; Castro, Kelly, & Shih, 2010). While there has been some insight gained on the issue, the reasons for the teacher shortage remain poorly understood, while consequently undermining the quality of the US education system (Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Sutchter, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2019).

Teacher Shortages in Special Education

There is a particularly persistent and serious shortage of teachers qualified to teach children with disabilities. For example, during the 2013-2014 school year, there was a 19 percent drop in the number of preliminary credentials issued to new teachers in special education and a 149 percent increase in the number of temporary permit, waivers, and intern credentials (Darling-Hammond, Furger, Shields, & Sutchter, 2016). Teacher turnover is also a serious problem and increases the vulnerability of students on their caseload (Darling-Hammond, Furger, Shields, & Sutchter, 2016; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008). Despite federal legislation such as the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA), recruiting teachers into special education remains an unresolved issue and continues to hinder the quality of education and care for students who need it most (Mason-Williams & et al., 2020).

One area of special education that continues to be particularly impacted by teacher shortage is early childhood special education (ECSE) (i.e., those working with young children who are identified with disabilities and their families) (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Malkus, Hoyer, & Sparks, 2015). ECSE provides services and supports for children who are at a key developmental age (i.e., birth to eight) and quality teaching is foundational to child development. The period of early development is one of enormous growth and is characterized by a high degree of brain plasticity (Britto, 2017). According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard (2007), brain architecture is formed in the early years and positive experiences help to shape healthy brain development. Moreover, families are central to healthy child development (Hanson,

Lynch, & Poulsen, 2013; Masten & Palmer, 2019). According to Bruder (2010), more than half of ECSE practitioners are not specifically trained to work with infants, toddlers, and preschool children with disabilities and their families.

The ECSE teacher shortage may exist because of the growing heterogeneity of children's and families' needs, the increasing complexity and variability of service systems, and insufficient supply of resources available to support infrastructure (Bruder, 2010; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Garcia & Weiss, 2019). The heterogeneity and increasingly complex needs of eligible young children and their families in addition to the variability in state-specific service provision, has resulted in challenges for implementation of services at both the state and local levels. Moreover, early childhood intervention remains a challenge to implement as revealed by the data reported by states in their annual performance plans on compliance to the U.S. Department of Education (Bruder, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Consequently, the ability of systems to implement early childhood intervention as intended by law, research, and recommended practice has become a challenge due to lack of resources. Further, the availability ECSE teachers continues to be impacted by inadequate financial aid for student teachers, and intricate teaching testing policies required to enter the profession. Teacher turnover is another contributor to the teacher shortage (Carver-Thomas, Leung, & Burns, 2021).

The ECSE teacher shortage threatens the quality and consistency of services that children and families receive as well as the quality of training and support ECSE practitioners obtain from working with experienced peers (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2011). There remains a critical need to better understand and address the ECSE teacher shortage in order to better support children and their families as well as to ensure that teachers in the classroom are not overburdened.

Solutions to the teacher shortage often focus on offering financial incentives (e.g., signing bonuses) and reducing requirements for entry into the classroom (Brownell & Sindelar, 2016). An example of a strategy that hinges on reduced requirements involves encouraging recent high school graduates and others to enter the teaching field within their communities (Grow Your Own Teachers, 2022). Although these attempts to reduce teacher preparation requirements may potentially solve the teacher shortage on a short-term basis, they ultimately increase the amount of under-qualified personnel who may be less likely to meet the needs of *all* students, especially those who are vulnerable and have disabilities. Perhaps more promising are programs that help recruit recent college graduates or those currently employed in other fields into teacher preparation programs (University of California, CalTeach, 2022).

Understanding Teachers' Resilience

A critical component to the teacher shortage is to gain a better understanding of the motivational reasons for the teacher shortage. One question is how these structural and institutional challenges create psychological conditions that prevent teachers from finding meaning and purpose in this difficult work. Currently, examination of this question is most often conducted through a stress and burnout lens (Ford, Olsen, Khojasteh, Ware, & Urick, 2019; Kim & Buric, 2020; Pressley, 2021). A stress and burnout approach focuses on the risk factors that contribute to the stress of teaching. For

example, high caseloads, lack of administrative support, classroom management challenges, and difficult communication with families.

While the negative psychological risk factors associated with this profession are important to consider, my research takes a different take, examining the reasons why some teachers remain and thrive in the field in spite of the difficulties. In other words, I am interested in resilience, the process of remaining engaged and motivated even in the face of deeply challenging conditions. I have chosen to do this by examining the role that collegial relationships play in promoting resilience in the face of the workplace demands in ECSE.

Accordingly, my study explored the professional relationships that practitioners experience with their colleagues and examined the ways that these relationships promote or undermine their resilience in the context of the daily stressors and challenges faced in the classroom. Little research currently exists on relational resilience in the field of ECSE (Drew & Sosnowski, 2019; Gu, 2018; Gupta, 2019). This study sought to address the gap in literature by giving a voice to ECSE practitioners with the goal of identifying the experiences that they perceived as deepening their commitment to remaining in the field.

Researcher's Perspective

After seven years of teaching in a variety of ECSE roles (i.e., behavioral therapist, early interventionist, special education coordinator, special education consultant), I returned to school to pursue my PhD in order to dive deeper into a topic that became a personal interest of mine during my teaching years: child and caregiver resilience. During the first year of teaching, I worked in an Autism specific preschool classroom and experienced the many rewards and challenges that come with working in the field of ECSE. I enjoyed working with children and families everyday and providing support during an impressionable stage of development. What personally made teaching in ECSE most rewarding for me was playing with children, connecting with families, helping families feel empowered, and working with my colleagues to help children and families overcome adversity, celebrate diversity, and reach their full potential.

Another factor that has influenced my passion for resilience research is my personal connection to disability. My oldest brother, Daniel, has a medical condition called Neurofibromatosis type 2 (NF2). NF2 is a medical condition that causes tumors to grow along the nervous system. My brother has had more than 250 tumors grow throughout his body over the last 30 years and more than 50 surgeries including 11 brain surgeries. Due to the continuous evolution of my brother's condition, my brother has lost many of his abilities since his diagnosis of NF2 at age eighteen. My brother is now in his early forties and has lost his ability to hear, walk, and verbally communicate. I have witnessed my brother and family experience the many levels of stress while navigating NF2 over the years. Nevertheless, I have witnessed a resilience and strength from my brother and family that has left me inspired, grateful, and highly motivated to help others rise despite adversity. My brother has ignited my passion to work in the field of ECSE and find innovative and alternative ways to support children, families, and caregivers impacted by disability.

I also have a personal connection to experiencing the highs and lows that are common to the field of ECSE. I worked as a behavioral interventionist and provided

Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) support for children and families during my first year of working in the field of ECSE. I worked as an ABA therapist prior to my role as an Autism preschool teacher. I experienced the many stressors, challenges, and joys that ECSE practitioners often experience during their first years of teaching. During one of my sessions with my client, my supervisor came for a routine visit to offer support and guidance. During my supervisor's visit, my client became upset and started to cry and scream for about 40 minutes. He eventually threw a large toy bus at me and it hit me in the face. I tried to remain calm and present with my client but my stress levels increased. My supervisor noticed my reaction and told me to go into the other room to take a break. I felt embarrassed and ashamed. I kept worrying about what my supervisor would say about not being able to regulate my emotions and support my client. I thought perhaps I was not suited for the field of ECSE. After about five minutes, my supervisor came into the room and to my surprise, reached out and gave me a hug. I was trying to be strong and pretend that the hard session didn't affect me but she told me that it was okay to get upset. As I opened up, she comforted me and shared her experience of working with clients, and revealed that every behavioral therapist she mentored had become discouraged at some point in their career. My supervisor provided the support and guidance that I needed at the time to bounce back from my stressful session. I have always remembered her mentorship and the words that she shared. This experience empowered me in my teaching and helped me overcome similar stressful encounters.

This experience ultimately empowered me in my teaching. I continued to receive support as I came across new stressors and challenges in the field of ECSE. I was fortunate to have strong and invested mentors early in my career that were there for me when I needed them. For example, my mentor of my teaching credential program was always available by email if I ever had questions about the experiences in ECSE. I began to meet with her every couple of months over coffee to catch up and chat about my experiences in ECSE. Her wisdom and guidance deeply shaped my teaching and growth as an educator. Furthermore, I received support from my former master teachers, teaching credential cohort, and colleagues at work. As I began to connect with my colleagues and find a supportive community, I noticed that the stress of teaching in ECSE became more and more manageable. After a few years of teaching in ECSE, I began to reciprocate the same advice that my team of mentors gave me with newly hired teachers. I witnessed firsthand the relational aspect of teaching in ECSE and how relationships with colleagues can provide the support needed to overcome the stress of teaching and thrive in the field. Despite the high levels of stress, I felt empowered in my teaching by the relationships that I had with my colleagues. My experiences and relationships with my colleagues instilled a desire to study the topic of relational resilience in the field of ECSE.

Moreover, my training and experiences as an ECSE professional also affected the way that I conducted this study in terms of the decisions I made in terms of the overall design, procedures, and analytic approach. I will address these in the final chapter of my dissertation.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Risk and Resilience Theory

To address the problem of the teacher shortage, there is a need to understand why some teachers remain in the field. In other words, what contributes to these teachers' resilience? There is not one agreed upon interpretation of resilience and perspectives on this idea have evolved over time. Traditionally, the common components of resilience are identified around an individual's ability to overcome and bounce back from adversity (Heman et al., 2011; Hons, Gott, & Hoare, 2016). Rutter defined resilience as the phenomenon that occurs when an "individual overcomes adversity, survives stress, and rises above disadvantages" (1999, p.3). Individual protective factors of resilience that contribute to Rutter's model include the person's temperament, personality, and coping strategies (Rutter, 1999).

This definition of resilience has been expanded to include individual risk and protective factors within the person's social context. For example, Masten (2002) argued that risk and protective factors include relationships with family members and other key individuals as well as personal characteristics (see also Masten & Reed, 2002). This could be observed in an individual who may experience heightened risk of psychological maladjustment if she experiences abuse, neglect, or negative interactions with a family member. On the contrary, an individual who faces adverse circumstances may benefit from protective factors such as a warm and responsive relationship with a caregiver. These contemporary perspectives also consider personality characteristics such as emotional stability and control beliefs to play a role in how individuals cope and deal with everyday stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For instance, an individual who demonstrates a flexible attitude in the face of a challenging life event may be protected from the deleterious effects of the challenges. Yet an individual with little capacity for self-regulation will not be protected from a similarly challenging life event. Masten (2002) argues that risk and protective factors change depending on the individual and situation.

Teachers' Resilience

Teacher resilience theory has been developed in an effort to better understand the factors that enable teachers to persist in the face of challenges (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011). Teacher resilience is defined as the process by which teachers are able to *thrive* rather than just survive in the profession and is conceptualized as a dynamic relationship between individual and contextual risk and protective factors. According to teacher resilience theory, individual characteristics (e.g., motivation, teaching self-efficacy), school and classroom contextual factors (e.g., class size, mentoring, relationships with students and colleagues) all play a role in teachers' resilience. The outcome of teachers' resilience is that teachers feel effective in their teaching role, maintain job satisfaction, and remain in the field despite the adversity, stress, and challenges that arise within the profession (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011).

Relational Resilience

While teacher resilience theory focuses on individual factors as well as those in the context, relational resilience theory focuses even more specifically on the role of relationships. Relational resilience theory draws from relational-cultural theory (RCT)

and emphasizes the role that relationships play in resilience (Jordan, 2006). RCT argues that all psychological growth occurs in relationships and focuses on the psychological suffering that accompanies movement out of relationships (isolation) (Miller, 1986; Jordan, 1992). Miller and Jordan's model of relational resilience has its theoretical underpinnings in relational-cultural theory, which states that all psychological growth occurs in relationships and within a relational dynamic. As noted earlier, resilience as described in risk and resilience theory refers to the phenomenon that occurs when an individual overcomes adversity (Rutter, 1999). Relational-cultural theory suggests that resilience resides not only in the individual as Rutter suggests, but also in the capacity for an individual to develop mutually empathetic, and responsive relationships. In fact, Jordan (1992) criticizes developmental models of resilience and argues that such models over-emphasize the individual, separate self. More specifically, she argues that such theories overemphasize that the goal of healthy development as movement from dependence to independence and demonstration of self-sufficiency (Jordan, 2012). Relational resilience theory draws from RCT and argues that an individual feels connected in a relationship when there is mutual empathy, responsiveness, and care. On the contrary, an individual feels disconnected in a relationship when there is a lack of mutual empathy and growth-fostering characteristics.

Within relational resilience theory, three growth-fostering features maintain relationships and promote relational resilience, including (1) mutual empathy, (2) empowerment, and (3) development of courage (Jordan, 2003). At the core of relational resilience is the movement toward mutuality. In other words, these relationships do not just offer social support but offer a relationship that is growth-fostering for both participants in the relationship (Jordan, 2003; Le Cornu, 2009). Jordan defines "mutuality" as mutually supportive relationships that are bi-directional and empower humans to feel connected and grow rather than feel isolated or immobilized.

Empowerment is also cited as a building block of relational resilience. Empowerment is present in relationships when such connections enable participants to experience energy, creativity, and flexibility (Jordan, 2006). Lastly, resilience involves the development of courage, defined as the capacity to move into situations without fear or hesitation (Jordan, 2006; Le Cornu, 2009). Together these three components of mutual empathy, empowerment, and development of courage act as the building blocks of relational resilience (Jordan, 2006). This study was guided by the relational resilience theoretical model developed by Jean Baker Miller (1986) and expanded by Judith Jordan (2003).

A main assumption of Jordan (2006) is that a person's engagement in mutually empathetic and responsive relationships promotes teachers' resilience. In other words, the relationships that teachers develop with their students, teaching colleagues, supervisors and parents of students are all potential contributors to enhance resilience; allowing them to maintain interest and enthusiasm for their work, to feel confident in their professional capabilities, and to trust in others even in the face of professional demands and challenges (Le Cornu, 2013). On the other hand, when individuals do not experience mutuality, they often feel hindered by a sense of immobilization and isolation (Jordan, 2006). Jordan suggests that this is when teachers become vulnerable to professional burnout and leaving the field.

Purpose of Study

Given the relational nature of early childhood teaching, the protective and risk factors of relational resilience become an essential component to better understand teacher experiences as well as career satisfaction and commitment. Little research currently exists on relational resilience in the field of ECSE (Gupta, 2019). This study addressed the research gap by examining the role that relational resilience plays in teacher commitment, wellbeing, and job satisfaction. In doing so, the larger goal was to better understand why many teachers do not remain in the field, particularly in settings that serve marginalized youth. Achieving this understanding is a key factor in promoting equitable education for *all* children.

My focus in this dissertation is phenomenological, with the goals of understanding teachers' own perspectives on their emotional wellbeing, their experience in the context of professional relationships, and their motivation to meet the challenges of their job. Consistent with a phenomenological focus I chose to conduct in-depth, open-ended interviews with practicing teachers. My interviews were guided by the following research questions:

- (1) What features characterize the professional relationships of ECSE practitioners?
- (2) What are the key factors of professional relationships that seem to promote their resilience with respect to their work?
- (3) What are the key factors of professional relationships that seem to undermine their resilience with respect to their work?

Understanding the professional relationships of ECSE practitioners and the role that such relationships play in ECSE practitioners' resilience offers an important contribution to developing innovative supports for ECSE practitioners and addressing the ECSE teacher shortage.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of resilience offers a useful way of conceptualizing the factors that contribute to teachers' commitment to their work even when conditions are very challenging (Chu, 2020; Drew and Sonowski, 2019; Gu, 2013). Resilience is a construct that has been well researched over recent decades particularly with a lens focused on children and how to best support their resilience (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). However, far less research has examined the conditions that foster resilience among teachers (Schussler et al, 2018). In this chapter, I provide an overview of the research on teachers' resilience, and show how it can be useful to addressing the factors that contribute to teachers' wellbeing in their workplace.

As applied to teachers, the risk and resilience framework focuses on teachers' ability to sustain high levels of energy, dedication, and motivation for the field despite the stressful conditions that are often present in their workplace (Ainsworth & Oldfield, 2019). This approach stands in contrast to a stress and burnout lens, which focuses on how teachers' challenges contribute to their tendency to burn out and leave the profession (Harmsen, Helms-Lorenz, Maulana, & Veen, 2018).

Relational resilience is a subarea of risk and resilience theory that explores how interpersonal relationships that are mutually sustaining promote resilience (Jordan, 1992). Given that teachers' work involves a dense network of relationships with colleagues as well as students and their families, relational resilience is a topic worthy of exploration that may offer innovative ideas for improving teachers' workplace experience.

In this chapter, I provide a review of four areas of the literature on resilience as they have been applied to the field of education. I begin with the literature that examines the full array of factors that might affect teachers' resilience, with a specific emphasis on the literature pertaining to teachers in special education. In the second half of the chapter I focus particularly on the notion of relational resilience as it applies to teachers' work life, including how relational resilience has been examined in the context of early childhood special education.

Research on Teachers' Resilience

Teacher resilience theory has emerged as a way to support teachers by studying teachers who stay in the field with commitment and psychological wellbeing despite the challenges of teaching (Drew & Sosnowski, 2019; Mansfield, Beltman, Broadley, & Weatherby-Fell, 2016). Brunetti (2006) developed perhaps the most widely accepted definition of teacher resilience, characterizing it as the process that enables teachers to maintain commitment to teaching despite challenging conditions and recurring setbacks. Although there is some debate regarding the exact definition of teacher resilience, there is a broad agreement that teacher resilience is a process in which a teacher positively adapts to an adverse situation (Beltman et al., 2011; Brunetti, 2006; Mansfield, Beltman, Broadley, & Weatherby-Fell 2016). From my review of the literature, I would argue that the debate is more an issue of different research foci than a debate about the meaning of teacher resilience in the sense that various researchers have explored a wide array of factors that are linked to teachers' resilience. For example, some studies have taken a person-focused perspective and focused on individual teacher capacities and skills (i.e.,

intrinsic motivation, teacher effectiveness, interpersonal skills) that promote resilience (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011; Clara, 2017; Leroux and Theoret, 2014). Other studies have taken a process-focused perspective and focused on the processes that work to sustain teachers despite challenges including psychological appraisals (Castro et al., 2010; Mansfield, Beltman, & Price, 2014). Finally, several studies use a context-focused perspective and focus on the context of the teacher such as external resources and administrative support (Bobek, 2002; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Johnson et al., 2014). Most scholars agree that the various foci in teacher resilience research are largely complementary, informing different aspects of resilience that can be understood as a dynamic process taken as a whole.

In the past 15 years, a growing number of studies have taken a person-focused perspective and identified individual protective factors that contribute to teachers' resilience (Day & Gu, 2009; Drew & Sosnowski, 2019; Howard & Johnson, 2004). For example, Hong (2012) examined the differences between teachers who left the field or intended to stay in the field by examining what psychological factors (i.e., self-efficacy, intrinsic values, and beliefs) contributed to teachers' resilience (i.e., an intention to stay in the field). The study included a semi-structured interview with 14 beginning secondary science teachers who were in their first five years of teaching. Major psychological factors including self-efficacy, intrinsic values, and beliefs, were examined to understand how these teachers interpreted the teaching environment and made the decision to stay or leave the field of teaching. The study found that all teachers shared an intrinsic motivation to teach even as they experienced challenges characteristic of the field such as those related to classroom management. Moreover, the study found that teachers who intended to stay in the field showed higher levels of self-efficacy with respect to teaching than those who had left it. Thus, the study found that the psychological factor of teaching self-efficacy to be a salient factor associated with teachers' intention to stay in the field.

Another study by Mansfield, Beltman, Price, and McConney (2011) investigated the opinions of early career teachers with respect to the personality characteristics that might contribute to resilience in the workplace. The study used survey data from 200 graduating and early career teachers. The teachers were invited to complete a survey at the end of their teacher preparation program. The researchers were interested in how early career teachers perceived resilient teachers. For this reason, the open-ended question "*How would you describe a resilient teacher?*" was included in the survey. The reported descriptions of a resilient teacher were then analyzed for content and emerging themes. The data analysis included coding the name of categories based on the participants' words and descriptions of a resilient teacher. Twenty-three aspects of resilience were identified in the study's data analysis. The most commonly reported aspects of a resilient teacher fell into four themes: (1) professional traits professional traits (i.e., organized, flexible, reflective, and adaptable), (2) emotional traits (i.e., sense of humor, enjoyed teaching, emotional regulation, self-care, and ability to bounce back), (3) social traits (i.e., strong interpersonal and communication skills, problem-solver, sought social support) and (4) motivational traits (i.e., positive, optimistic, persisted in face of challenges, growth mindset, confident, and set realistic goals and expectations).

Studies have also used a process-focused perspective to investigate traits such as psychological appraisals and how they contribute to teachers' resilience. For example, some studies have considered the ways that mindfulness-based professional development

programs can increase teachers' resilience (i.e., teacher's mindful-awareness, non-reactivity, and distress tolerance). For example, one study by Schussler and colleagues (2018) investigated 224 elementary teachers' experiences with a mindfulness-based intervention, Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE). The study examined the effects of the CARE intervention on teachers' subsequent experiences of stress and resilience by measuring participants' perceived levels of occupational stress through in-depth interviews. The interviews were used as a tool to identify the mechanisms of change that contribute to teachers' resilience following the CARE program. The interview protocol consisted of questions about what was most enjoyable and most challenging about teaching, sources of stress both before and after receiving CARE professional development, how they handled stressful situations previously and currently, and what was most and least helpful about the CARE program. Results revealed that the teachers who reported more use of mindfulness in their teaching (i.e., acting with mindful-awareness and non-reactivity) reported feeling more efficacious in their teaching despite encountering stressful situations. Thus, this study suggested that increasing opportunities for teachers to learn effective psychological tools or appraisals through mindfulness act as a contributing factor to their resilience (Schussler et al., 2018).

Another area of research in the teacher resilience literature uses a context-focused perspective and examines the role that environmental factors such as school policies and practices play in promoting teachers' resilience. The most commonly explored of these institutional factors include administrative support, professional development opportunities, and collaborative experiences designed to develop new skills (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011; Drew and Sosnowski, 2019; Wosnitza et al., 2018). A study by Sikma (2021) explored the Building Resilience in Teacher Education (BRiTE) professional development program, which focused on five areas: (1) building resilience; (2) maintaining support networks and building new relationships in schools; (3) cultivating wellbeing and maintaining motivation; (4) problem solving, engaging in ongoing professional learning, and communicating effectively; and (5) developing optimism, enhancing emotional awareness, and managing emotions. The study conceptualized resilience as a process whereby personal resources related to resilience (i.e., motivation; social and emotional competence), and contextual resources (e.g., relationships, school culture, support networks) interact as individuals harness resources and use particular strategies (e.g., problem solving, time management, maintaining work-life balance) to enable resilience outcomes (e.g., commitment, job satisfaction, wellbeing, engagement). In this study, BRiTE professional development workshops were presented to beginning K-12 teachers in the US. The participants of the workshops were asked to give their feedback on the program through an online survey. All respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that the workshops helped increase their awareness and understanding of their own ability to promote resilience. More specifically, the teachers reported feeling more confident in their ability to cultivate their own wellbeing and teaching effectiveness as beginning teachers (Sikma, 2021).

In sum, teacher resilience theory has focused on how individual characteristics, cognitive appraisals, and environmental factors promote resilience, typically defined as teachers staying in the field with a sense of commitment and satisfaction despite the stress of teaching. The majority of the research on teacher resilience theory has been

applied to general education. In the next section I focus specifically on those studies that examined teachers' resilience in special education settings.

Teachers' Resilience Applied to Special Education

Understanding special education teachers' resilience remains a critical area of research for many reasons including the increasing number of students who qualify for special education services and the number of unfilled teaching positions. In fact, the vacancy rate in special education positions is over five times that of positions in general education (Belknap & Taymans, 2015; Boe, 2006; Ondrasek, Carver-Thomas, Scott, Darling-Hammond, 2020). Special education teachers often face numerous challenges including large caseloads, a heavy workload, compliance obligations, lack of administrative support, excessive paperwork, isolation, low compensation and salary, and minimal opportunities for collaboration with colleagues (Albrecht, Johns, Mounstevan, & Olorunda, 2009; Carlson, Brauen, Klein, Schroll, Willing, 2002; Ondrasek, Carver-Thomas, Scott, Darling-Hammond, 2020). Because of these inadequate working conditions, many qualified teachers leave the field of special education, and so the majority of teachers working with students with disabilities are under qualified and stressed (Ondrasek, Carver-Thomas, Scott, Darling-Hammond, 2020). There is an urgent need to better support special education teachers so that they will remain in the field.

Relatively little research has examined teachers' resilience in special education. The few studies that do so mainly explore the ways that individual factors contribute to resilience (Akbar and Mauna, 2020; Castro, Kelly, & Shih, 2010; Gu and Day, 2007; Gu and Li, 2013). For example, Gu and Day (2007) examined the role of special education teachers' personal beliefs and characteristics as well as their support by administrators in promoting their resilience. The study conceptualized resilience as teachers' capacity to manage challenging interactions and to maintain commitment and effectiveness with students. The study included data from a mixed method, four-year longitudinal study conducted in England with 300 teachers in 100 schools called the Variations in Teachers' Work, Lives, and Effectiveness (VITAE). Data examining teachers' perceived effectiveness were collected through twice yearly semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with teachers. The study revealed that individual factors (i.e., intrinsic motivation, strong values of teaching, teaching self-efficacy) as well as strong administrative support were contributing factors to teacher resilience.

Another study by Castro, Kelly, & Shih (2010) investigated contributing factors to teachers' resilience in fifteen beginning teachers. The study conceptualized teachers' resilience as a process that happens when an individual employs specific strategies in response to experiencing psychological disruption from an adverse situation. In this process, individual strategies allow a person to overcome adversity and gain new insights to minimize the impact of adversity in future encounters. Fifteen beginning teachers were asked to identify at least two challenges that they had faced during their first year of teaching and to describe the strategies they employed to overcome these obstacles. Findings indicated that teachers used a variety of strategies including help-seeking, managing difficult relationships, and problem-solving that serve as contributing factors to their resilience.

In summary, most of the research on teachers' resilience applied to special education is limited and focused on the individual contributors (Akbar and Mauna, 2020; Castro, Kelly, & Shih, 2010; Gu and Day, 2007; Gu and Li, 2013). In terms of examining relational aspects of teachers' resilience, the majority of studies focused on the concept of social support when examining teachers' experiences in their professional relationships. The most common findings from these few studies indicated that administrative support helped special education teachers bounce back from the challenges of teaching. Further, these studies focused tightly on the receipt of social support by one individual in the relationship rather than focusing more widely on the construct of mutuality that is central to Jordan's model of relational resilience. This gap in research reveals a critical need to examine the role that relationships play in teachers' resilience, particularly in the area of special education.

Relational Resilience Applied to Education

In the research I have discussed so far, the focus has been on how an individual teacher's resilience is a function of personal beliefs or characteristics, or is derived from the receipt of support from another person. In contrast, the construct of relational resilience developed by Jordan (2003, 2006) sees resilience as stemming from engaging in certain kinds of nurturing relationships, not from individual capacity to overcome challenges. Jordan's model of relational resilience is a part of relational-cultural theory (RCT), a comprehensive framework that focuses on psychological growth through and toward relationships (Jordan & Hartling, 2002). Jordan (2003) identifies three aspects of relationships that form a context for the development of a capacity to persevere in adverse circumstances; participants in these relationships are mutually empathic, committed to mutual empowerment, and oriented toward the development of courage. The relational perspective proposed by Jordan and elaborated on by others argues that strengthening an individual's capacity for these growth-fostering relationships is a far more effective way of fostering long-term adaptation to the vicissitudes of life than is promoting individual qualities like autonomy or self-confidence (Jordan, 1992; Spencer, Jordan, & Sazama, 2004; Surrey & Jordan, 2013; Trepal & Duffey, 2016).

As I have noted, most of the previous research on teachers' resilience has focused on individual characteristics that are associated with resilience, or on one-way support from colleagues or administrators (Castro, Kelly, and Shih, 2010; Gu and Day, 2007). However, there has been some research that conceptualizes the promotion of resilience through relationships characterized by mutual empathy and empowerment rather than one-way assistance from one person toward a teacher recipient (Papatraianou & Le Cornu, 2014). Some empirical studies focus solely on collegial relationships (Day, 2008; Gu & Day, 2007; Howard & Johnson, 2004; McCormack, Gore, & Thomas, 2006) while other studies examine professional as well as personal relationships with family and friends (McCormack Gore, & Thomas, 2006; Papatraianou & Le Cornu, 2014). For example, Le Cornu (2013) used Jordan's (2006) model of relational resilience to investigate the core constructs of mutual empathy, empowerment, and development of courage in the context of teachers' relationships with their students. The study used a qualitative approach to interview 60 beginning teachers and investigate the complex interplay among individual, relational, and contextual conditions that operate over time to

promote early career teachers' resilience. The findings suggest that teachers who are new to the field felt confident and competent when relationships with their students were based on mutual trust, respect, care, and integrity (Le Cornu, 2013). The teachers specifically revealed that they felt affirmed by their students when the students engaged with them and provided positive feedback on their teaching. Positive student engagement contributed to teachers' feelings of self-worth. On the other hand, teachers reported that they felt less fulfilled and more stressed when their students were perceived as non-responsive.

Other studies found that resilience is fostered by teachers' professional relationships with mentor teachers. For example, Morettini, Luet, and Vernon-Dotson (2020) examined the mentoring experiences of 14 beginning teachers through semi-structured interviews and asked the question: "How and to what extent does mentoring build beginning teacher resilience?" Findings revealed that teachers showed signs of resilience in the sense that they intended to stay at their position when they felt supported by their mentor teachers. More specifically, mentoring contributed to teachers' overall sense of belonging and wanting to stay in their field. A sense of belonging helped to buffer teachers' perceptions of the demands of teaching and thus acted as a contributing factor to teacher resilience. This study is limited as it studied relationships from the narrow lens of social support rather than the construct of mutuality.

Another area of research in the literature focuses specifically on the role that colleagues play in promoting resilience. Le Cornu (2009) applied Jordan's relational resilience theory in a review of research on the learning communities model of practicum in an undergraduate education program. The learning communities view is underpinned by the social constructivist position that learning should be communal, participatory, and collaborative (Bruner, 1996; Le Cornu, 2009). Participating teachers who learned about reflective practice and active listening were then to engage productively with their peers and mentor teachers. Establishing relationships with mentor teachers also had a significant impact on teachers' sense of competency in the classroom. Overall, the findings from this study indicate that professional experiences provided opportunities for teachers to participate in a wide variety of relationships with colleagues. It demonstrated the potential to contribute to teacher resilience by providing opportunities for teachers to participate in reciprocal learning relationships with their colleagues. Other studies have also found that strong collegial support and sense of belonging promotes teacher resilience (Belknap and Taymans, 2015; Jones, Youngs, & Frank, 2013).

Other research has focused on resilience as related to the-relationships of teachers with their friends and families (Day, 2008; Le Cornu, 2013, McCormack, Gore, & Thomas, 2006). For example, Howard and Johnson (2004) examined teachers' resilient strategies for coping with the stress of teaching. The study conceptualized teachers' resilience as the ability to use "resilient" coping strategies in face of the stress of teaching. The coping strategies that resilient teachers in the study displayed were responding appropriately to challenging behaviors of students, effectively managing relationships with colleagues, managing time and workloads successfully, and handling change and challenges with flexibility and creativity. The study used 45-minute semi-structured interviews to investigate the view of ten teachers located across three different schools serving students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The participants reported varying experiences of supportive relationships with family and friends.

Teachers who most frequently used resilient strategies for coping reported that they had strong social connections with family and friends.

In summary, the research investigating the role that relationships play in teachers' resilience is limited and tightly focused on professional relationships (i.e., students, mentor teachers, school leaders, and colleagues). The majority of the studies found that professional relationships served as a contributing factor to teachers' resilience (Belknap and Taymans, 2015; Ingersoll and Strong, 2011; Jones, Youngs, & Frank, 2013; Le Cornu, 2009; Le Cornu, 2013). Other studies suggest that disconnection in relationships lead to more stress in teaching (Flores and Day, 2006). However, the majority of these studies did not fully investigate the role that relational qualities of mutual empathy and empowerment play in promoting teachers' resilience. Further, my review of the literature suggests that there are even fewer studies examining the role that these relational qualities play in the resilience of ECSE practitioners, as I will discuss in the next section.

Relational Resilience Applied to Early Childhood Special Education

Early Children Special Education (ECSE) refers to services for children from birth to age five and their families covered under Part C and section 619 of Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). ECSE practitioners are professionals that work with young children with disabilities and their families in a variety of settings including homes, classrooms, and other community settings (Council for Exceptional Children, 2020). ECSE practitioners may work in a variety of different roles including early interventionists, special day class preschool teachers, and inclusion specialists. There are several recommended practices that govern service delivery in ECSE, the most salient being family-centered care, team process, and natural and inclusive environments (Bruder, 2010; Council for Exceptional Children, 2020; Division of Early Childhood, 2014).

A limited number of studies have examined the topic of relational resilience within the field of ECSE (Gupta, 2019). Most studies in ECSE have focused on the relationships between families and ECSE professionals (Bruder, 2010). These studies primarily focused on the benefit that parent-professional partnerships can have on families' resilience rather than on that of teachers (Knoche et al., 2012; Starr & Foy, 2012; Trivette, Dunst, & Hamby, 2010). The theoretical framework used in these studies is more consistent with the individual notion of social support rather than on the construct of mutually empathic and empowering relationships as articulated by Jordan (2009). For example, Chu (2017) examined ECSE practitioners' perspectives on effective parent-professional partnerships in Taiwan. The study examined nine parent-professional partnerships through semi-structured interviews with ECSE practitioners. Results from this study suggest that effective two-way communication and reciprocal engagement was viewed as key to ECSE practitioners' building successful partnerships with families. While this study focused on the perspective of ECSE practitioners, it did not examine the role that relationships with families played in fostering resilience in the practitioners.

Another related area of research examines the effects of supportive programs designed to provide mentorship, reflective supervision, and coaching on the professional development of ECSE practitioners (Voss & Bufkin, 2011). For example, a study by Walsh, Steffen, Manz, & Innocenti (2021), explored the effects on home visitors in the

Early Head Start program of participating in individualized coaching sessions for four months. All participants completed individualized coaching sessions across four months. Fifteen of the coaching sessions were videotaped and analyzed through descriptive coding, thematic analysis, and qualitative trajectory analysis. Results indicated that home visitors accomplished their individual professional goals including skills of reflective practice, active listening, effective communication, and flexibility to challenging situations. This study investigated the professional development of ECSE practitioners but did not examine ECSE practitioners' resilience.

Another study by Zan and Donegan-Ritter (2014) examined the impact of a yearlong professional development program that included self-reflection, peer coaching, and mentoring. Monthly changes in the quality of teacher-child interactions were measured throughout the school year. Results indicated that there were significant increases in four dimensions related to behavior management, productivity, language modeling and quality of feedback. Overall, these studies examine the role that relationships have on teacher outcomes including teacher-child interaction and meeting professional goals. However, these studies do not examine the role that relationships play on teacher resilience. Nor do these studies appear to meet the criteria of mutual empathy and empowerment outlined by Jordan. This gap in literature indicates a need to examine relational resilience in ECSE practitioners.

Rationale for This Study

While there is some research that exists investigating the relationships that ECSE practitioners experience in the workplace, virtually none of these studies examines the relationships using Jordan's model based on mutual empathy and empowerment. As such, they are consistent with the individual-oriented studies examining a one-way direction of effect from colleague or mentor to the practitioner. Moreover, the majority of the research explores the effects of paraprofessionals, parent-professional partnerships, and mentorship on teachers' skills but not on the sense of courage and persistence indicative of resilience (Chu, 2017; Walsh, Steffen, Manz, & Innocenti, 2021; Voss & Bufkin, 2011; Zan & Donegan-Ritter, 2014). There remains a significant need for research to examine the role that ECSE practitioners' professional relationships have on ECSE practitioners' resilience.

In this study, I used a phenomenological approach to understand the nature of the relationships that ten ECSE practitioners experienced in the classroom. I moved beyond the more limited notion of social support from professional relationships and explored the psychologically complex construct of bi-directional and mutually supportive relationships, i.e., those based on mutual empathy and empowerment. I was also interested in identifying any patterns linking this type of relationship to teachers' resilience in the workplace.

My objective in learning about their perspectives was to investigate the following research questions: *(1) what features characterize the professional relationships of ECSE practitioners? (2) what are the key factors of professional relationships that seem to promote their resilience with respect to their work? and (3) what are the key factors of professional relationships that seem to undermine their resilience with respect to their work?*

Chapter III: METHODS

Overview of Research Design

A phenomenological qualitative approach was utilized to support the exploratory nature of the study. The aim of this research study was to better understand early childhood special education (ECSE) practitioners' capacity to be resilient to leaving the field. Further, this research study aimed to gain a better understanding of the role of relationships in ECSE practitioners' relational resilience. A qualitative design was used to allow for a holistic and in-depth exploration into the experiences of ECSE practitioners (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Marshall & Rossman, 2014).

This study used a qualitative design and investigated the topic of inquiry through open-ended questions and responses. A qualitative research design allows for researchers to understand the meaning that individuals ascribe to social or human experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Qualitative research honors an inductive style, a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of reporting the complexity of a situation in a flexible manner (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). Furthermore, qualitative research focuses on the social phenomena holistically and takes place in the natural world (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). In this qualitative study, the role of relationships in teachers' resilience was examined by gaining an understanding of ECSE practitioners' experiences. This study applied all aspects of a qualitative research design to study the topic of inquiry and research questions.

Additionally, a phenomenological tradition was used in conducting the research for this study. Phenomenological inquiry is a rigorous qualitative research method that is used to explore how human beings experience a certain phenomenon, in this case, the role that relationships play in teachers' resilience. It allows the researcher to delve into the perceptions, perspectives, understandings, and feelings of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of interest (Alase, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Marshall & Rossman, 2014). The researcher then describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants (Alase, 2017). This description is the culmination of the essence of experiences for several individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In this study, multiple realities of the role that relationships play in teachers' resilience gathered from multiple ECSE participants were investigated through the use of in-depth interviews allowing for different themes to emerge.

Methods Overview

The methods used for this study consisted of two phases of data collection including the first phase of the Demographics and Resilience Questionnaire (DRQ) and second phase of the in-depth interviews. The first phase of data collection was based on the DRQ. The DRQ served two purposes. The first was to document the interview participants' background, experiences, and significant demographic details. The second purpose of the questionnaire was to provide information on interview participants' professional relationships. The DRQ also contained questions about how connected or

disconnected they felt in their professional relationships. I developed the questionnaire using the relational resilience theoretical framework.

The second phase of data collection consisted of two interviews with each interview participant. I selected ten interviewees from those who responded to the DRQ. Selection was designed to ensure that roughly half the participants had experienced strong connections to their colleagues, while half had experienced relatively weak connections. I guided the conversation with a list of target questions but also allowed the interview participant to move the conversation in their own desired directions. The questions were generated based on the central constructs of relational resilience theory. They covered topics related to mutuality (i.e., mutual empathy, empowerment, and development of courage) in addition to the risk and protective factors of relational resilience.

Pilot Study

A pilot study of three ECSE practitioners was conducted to 1) to gather feedback regarding clarity of the DRQ as well as the interview protocol, 2) to evaluate the scope of data obtained across methods, and 3) to determine if the interview protocol was meaningful and efficient in collecting participant responses. I solicited pilot study participants' feedback and used feedback to revise the study's instruments and measures.

The DRQ and the in-depth interview protocol were revised following analysis of data generated through the pilot study. Questions on the DRQ were edited for clarity, and several extraneous items were deleted. I also deleted or edited interview questions that were not sufficiently open ended, or that seemed to imply a preferable answer. I also decided to conduct two interviews of approximately one hour with each participant in order to accommodate the participants' schedules. Accordingly, I divided the original interview protocol in half. The first interview covered the interview questions and the second interview consisted of completing the remaining interview questions from the interview protocol and/or asking follow-up questions from the first interview. The second interview occurred one to two weeks after the first interview. More information on the interview protocol can be found in Appendix C.

Researcher Role, Bias, and Subjectivity

I was the primary investigator for this study. I reflected on how my membership in various socio-demographic categories (e.g., gender, race, age), personal experiences with various kinds of relationships, as well as my identity as an ECSE practitioner may have shaped my interaction with the participants as well as my topic of inquiry. Clarifying the researcher's role, bias, and subjectivity creates an open and honest narrative with the reader that can strengthen the validity of qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

I have more than ten years of experience working in the field of ECSE. I have experienced the stress and joy that comes with being an ECSE practitioner and working with young children and families. I have experienced the stress of working in the field of ECSE and I have realized the importance of having supportive and responsive relationships with my colleagues. Personally, I have felt more efficacious in my practice

when I have a strong social support network in my professional relationships. As I have witnessed the challenges of working in ECSE and the affect it has on young children and families, I developed an interest in the role that relationships with colleagues play in teacher resilience. My professional experiences contributed to my interest in this study's topic and inquiry as I have become passionate about teacher wellness, retention, and resilience.

My experience of being an ECSE practitioner made me more sensitive, empathetic, and understanding of my participants' responses. I was able to engage with my participants by asking follow-up questions that were unique to being a member of the ECSE practitioner community. For example, when a participant mentioned their passion for making a difference in the field of ECSE, I was able to resonate with their response and ask about areas of the profession that excited them most. Additionally, I was able to relate to the stressful experiences of teaching that my participants expressed during the interviews and express my empathy. Throughout this study, I remained alert to how my biases and experiences as an ECSE practitioner and doctoral student may have influenced my research.

Measures

Demographics and Resilience Questionnaire

The purpose of the DRQ was to better understand ECSE practitioners' backgrounds, experiences, and significant demographic details. The questionnaire included 14 items. Six of the items were short answer responses (e.g., "What is your current job title?"). Four of the items were multiple-choice (e.g., "Do you intend to stay in the field of early childhood special education?" with options to select "yes", "no", or "undecided/decline to state"). One of the items was a 5 point rating scale including the question of, "In general, how connected do you feel to your colleagues at work?" with the response options of "extremely connected," "somewhat connected", "neutral", "somewhat disconnected", and "very disconnected." Three of the questions were open-ended (e.g., "please tell me your reasons for entering the field of early childhood special education"). Refer to Appendix B to see all questions on the DRQ.

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol consisted of 18 questions. I prompted my participants by including an electronic definition of relational resilience. The definition was given to participants in the beginning of the interview to read via email. The 18 interview questions were based on the central constructs of relational resilience theory. They covered the following topics of mutuality: mutual empathy, empowerment, and development of courage in addition to the risk and protective factors of relational resilience. For example, participants were asked to describe a colleague whom they felt connected to in an effort to better understand the construct of mutual empathy. Participants were asked to describe a time in their professional career when a colleague helped a participant to be creative or resolve a problem as a way to measure the construct of empowerment. Lastly, participants were asked to describe a time when a colleague

helped them to feel more courageous or less worried during a time when they felt fear or hesitation in their job as a way to measure the construct of development of courage.

Participant Recruitment

Interview participants needed to meet certain inclusion criteria. Requirements for participating included the following: (1) must be currently working in the field of ECSE, (2) must have received an ECSE credential or preschool special education training from an accredited university, (3) must be currently working with at least five children with disabilities, (4) must have worked in the field of ECSE for at least one year, and (5) must be working with children from three to five years of age.

Practitioners were recruited through a mailing list containing the names of ECSE practitioners with a degree from an accredited university in the Bay Area of about 20 potential participants. A recruitment letter was sent via email containing the study's research goals, information about compensation, and requirements for participating. Participants were informed that they would receive compensation in the amount of \$10 for completing the survey.

Participants who elected to participate in the DRQ were asked to click on a link provided in the recruitment email to take the questionnaire on Qualtrics. At that time they were invited to express an interest in participating in two follow-up interviews. They were informed that if they were selected for the interviews, they would receive an additional \$10 as compensation for participating in the interviews. Participants who were interested in participating in the in-depth interview indicated their interest by filling out a Google Form at the end of the questionnaire.

Purposeful sampling was used in phase two of the data collection to recruit 10 out of 13 interview participants. Purposeful sampling recommendations for phenomenological research include identifying participants who provide a variety of experiences related to the phenomenon of interest and facilitating comparisons of participants' experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Seidman, 2006). Therefore, prospective interview participants' responses to questions about their experiences within the DRQ informed the purposeful selection of participants. The primary inclusion criterion was based on participant descriptions of their professional relationships. I was interested in identifying those participants who had described themselves as having either particularly strong or particularly weak professional relationships. For example, if an ECSE practitioner indicated that she felt connected or disconnected in many professional relationships then that participant was selected to better understand what factors kept her in the field. Specifically, I focused on their responses to the four questions about their professional relationships, and calculated the average to generate an overall score of professional connectedness.

In addition to their overall connectedness score, the ten interviewees were selected based on other aspects of their responses from the DRQ. Survey participants who gave very short or nonspecific responses were not chosen for the in-depth interviews in an effort to gather as much rich data as possible for this study. Another justification for selecting certain interview participants was that some of the survey participant responses were similar to that of other survey participants. For example, two survey participants shared that they felt more connected to their teaching teams during the onset of the

COVID-19 pandemic due to more opportunities to connect online. Moreover, since I was trying to capture a wide variety of perspectives and experiences, I did not select survey participants who had closely similar experiences to another survey participant. For instance, the majority of survey participants shared that they had conflict and felt disconnected with their paraprofessionals in the classroom.

Overall, I received DRQ surveys from 18 individuals. Of those, 2 were not eligible for the study because they did not meet the basic criteria for inclusion in the study. I selected interview participants from the remaining group of 16 survey respondents. Of these, 3 were not selected for one of the reasons given above (e.g., their responses were insufficiently detailed). Of the remaining pool of 13 survey respondents, I selected five with the highest overall connectedness score and five with the lowest overall connectedness score to participate in the interviews. All of these agreed to participate in the interviews.

Interview Participants

Demographic characteristics of the interview participants are displayed in Table 1. The interview sample included ECSE participants with five different job titles including preschool special education teacher, education specialist, Pre K special education teacher, special education teacher of autism-specific special day class, and ECSE teacher. All interview participants spoke English as their first language. Nine of the ten participants were female, and one identified as “other.” The racial/ethnic background of the participants was diverse, and included five Caucasians, two Asian Americans, one Hispanic American, one Black/Hispanic, one American Indian, and one who self-identified as Black and Latina. Three of the participants were ages 20 to 29 years old, five were 30 to 39 years old, and two were 40 to 49 years old. To protect their anonymity I refer to participants by a pseudonym.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Interview Participants

Participant	Language	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Age	Current Job Title
Marie	English	Caucasian (other than Latino)	Female	27	Preschool Special Day Classroom Teacher
Jade	English	Asian American/Pacific Islander	Female	37	Preschool Special Education Teacher
Caitlin	English	Caucasian (other than Latino)	Female	44	Special Education Teacher

Kathy	English	Caucasian (other than Latino)	Female	33	Education Specialist/Teacher of an Autism-Specific Special Day Class
Karissa	English	Black or African American	Female	28	Special Education Teacher
Whitney	English	Black/Hispanic and American Indian	Female	37	PreK Special Education Teacher
Isabella	English	Caucasian (other than Latino)	Other	40	Special Education Teacher
Emily	English	Caucasian (other than Latino)	Female	38	Early Childhood Special Education Teacher
Kennycia	English	Black and Latina	Female	32	Special Education Preschool Teacher
Madison	English	Asian American/Pacific Islander	Female	25	Special Education Preschool Teacher

Professional Background and Experiences

The interview participants from this study reported a range of professional backgrounds and experiences (Table 2). Most of the participants (nine out of 10 participants) had been in the field for fewer than five years and 1 participant had been in the field for more than 10 years. All participants received their ECSE credential less than six years from the time of this study. Many participants (nine out of 10 participants) worked with 10 or more children during a typical workday. The majority of the participants (nine out of 10 participants) worked with 6-20 children diagnosed with one or more disabilities throughout the typical workday. Two participants worked with 20 or more children with a disability or disabilities.

When asked whether the participants intend to stay in the field of ECSE, nine out of 10 participants reported “yes.” Eight out of ten participants had worked at their current place of employment for fewer than five years. Five of the participants reported that they intended to leave their current place of employment within the next zero-five years. Two participants shared that they intended to stay at their current employer within the next five-10 years. One participant shared that she intended to stay at her current employer for more than 10 years and two reported that they were undecided or declined to state whether they intended to stay at their current employer.

Table 2

Interview Participants’ Professional Background and Experiences

Name	Years in ECSE	YSC	Blended	Disability	Stay in Field	Years at Employer	Stay at Employer
Marie	3.5	2	9-12	9-12	Yes	3.5	More than 10 years
Jade	4	2	20	20	Yes	1	0-5 years
Caitlin	10	9	9	9	Yes	4	U/D
Kathy	6.5	5	10	10	Yes	5	U/D
Karissa	3	1.5	20	14	U/D	3	0-5 years
Whitney	4	1	12	12	Yes	2	5-10 years
Isabella	20	3	35	20	Yes	4	0-5 years
Emily	7	4	12	12	Yes	5	0-5 years
Kennycia	8	2.5	28	28	Yes	2	0-5 years
Madison	1.5	1	10	10	Yes	0.5	5-10 years

Note. YSC refers to years since participant received an early childhood special education credential. Blended refers to participant working children with or without disabilities. Disability refers to participant working with children with a disability or disabilities. Stay in field refers to a participant’s intent to stay in the field of early childhood special education. Years at employer refers to years that a participant has worked at current

employer. Stay at employer refers to years that a participant intends to stay at their current employer. U/D refers to undecided/decline to state.

Interview Procedure

I conducted all the interviews. The interviews were audio-recorded, and I also took notes during the interviews of any salient information relating to my research objectives. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, varying from 20 minutes to an hour and 15 minutes. The interviews were conducted during the summer of 2020 and one to two months after the participants completed the DRQ. As noted earlier, the first interview covered the interview questions and the second interview consisted of completing the remaining interview questions from the interview protocol and/or asking follow-up questions from the first interview. The second interview occurred one to two weeks after the first interview occurred. Amazon gift certificates in the amount of \$10 were provided as incentives to those who participated in all phases of the data collection (i.e., \$10 for participating in the DRQ and \$10 for participating in the in-depth interviews). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted on Zoom during the summer of 2020.

Data Analysis

I conducted thematic analysis to understand the perceptions of the ten focal practitioners who participated in two in-depth interviews about their professional relationships and teaching experiences. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using the NVivo qualitative data analysis application. I first browsed through my interview transcripts and made notes of my initial impressions (Maxwell, 2013). I also used a deductive approach to allow the theoretical framework as reflected in my research questions to guide my analysis. Themes were based on the following criteria: (1) a finding was repetitive, (2) a finding was interesting and salient, (3) the interviewee stated it was important, and (4) it helped answer the research questions at hand.

After completing an initial close reading on the transcripts, I conducted this study's data analysis in three steps. First, I used a deductive approach to identify key passages related to resilience and professional relationships. I went through each participant's interviews and highlighted excerpts that met the criteria mentioned above. More specifically, I identified the presence of a theme when the participant repeated an experience, observation, or belief multiple times, as well as when the participant indicated that this experience, observation, or belief was important to her and when it was related to my research objectives.

Second, I grouped passages with similar meanings into categories based on theory as well as my background in the field of ECSE. I created a code for each of the 23 fine-grained themes that had emerged from the data. I selected those themes that were related to one of my three research questions. Refer to appendix A for more information.

Third, I identified those categories that were most closely related to the overall themes of professional resilience and relationships. I then collapsed these 14 categories into seven central themes. Each theme can be associated primarily with one of the three research questions. Refer to Table 3 below.

Data analysis was both inductive and deductive. The *inductive* process involved working back and forth between themes and the database until an established comprehensive set of themes emerged. The *deductive* process was also used to allow the theoretical concepts from relational resilience theory to guide the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Table 3

Table 3. Table of Research Questions and Overarching Themes.

RQ1: What features characterize the professional relationships of ECSE practitioners?	<p>Theme 1: Mutual Empathy</p> <p>Description: the dynamic that occurs when both people contribute to the growth of each other and the relationship (Jordan, 2012).</p> <p>Example quote: “And I would say that she [mentor - instructional coach] is also sort of bonded to me because I could tell that when I was sharing my frustrations with her, she was also feeling my pain.” - Madison</p>	<p>Theme 2:</p> <p>Development of Courage</p> <p>Description: the capacity to move into situations when an individual feels fear or hesitation (Jordan, 2012).</p> <p>Example quote: “I think when something new is thrown at us, I feel like taking the time to chat about it with one of the general education teachers or my SPED [special education] teacher or even my content specialist, I think that just helps us to talk it out... that makes it more doable.” – Karissa</p>	<p>Theme 3:</p> <p>Empowerment</p> <p>Description: connections that enable participants to experience energy, creativity, and flexibility (Jordan, 2012).</p> <p>Example quote: “To hear that my principal thinks highly of my program and can speak specifically about pieces of it and catches little moments and gives a lot of positive feedback, that I think is the single most driving factor for me to, like I said, work my hardest and balance the hardships of the job.” – Emily</p>
RQ2: What are the key factors of professional relationships that seem to promote ECSE practitioners’ resilience with respect to their	<p>Theme 1: Shared Personal Characteristics</p> <p>Description: shared personal beliefs, attributes, or personality traits that</p>	<p>Theme 2:</p> <p>Friendship Outside the Workplace</p> <p>Description: support that is received within a friendship that</p>	

work?	<p>help a participant feel connected to their colleague. The most common factor included participants feeling connected to colleagues when they shared values relating to their teaching.</p> <p>Example quote: “When a professional has a more open mind about instruction in terms of positive experiences and seeing those subtle differences or subtle progress notes versus constantly thinking about what's missing or how we need to shape this kid into what fits into our society, I think that that's another point in terms of how I connect with professionals.” – Emily</p>	<p>occurs outside of the work environment.</p> <p>Example quote: “Yeah, I do [feel connected to my colleagues] because I just feel like we spend time, we'll text outside of work or hang out occasionally and stuff like that so I do feel like there's a connection there.” - Caitlin</p>
RQ3: What are the key factors of professional relationships that seem to undermine ECSE practitioners’ resilience with respect to their work?	<p>Theme 1: Personal Characteristics</p> <p>Description: a personal characteristic of a colleague that made it difficult to establish a sense of mutual empathy and inhibited the participant’s ability to experience courage and</p>	<p>Theme 2: External Factors</p> <p>Description: External factor refers to a factor that occurs outside of a participant’s relationship with a colleague that hinders their ability to develop mutual empathy in their</p>

<p>empowerment. Common factors included the characteristic of being inflexible or negative in a collaborative situation.</p> <p>Example quote: “A lot of things [my aide] says to the kids, I don't... It's just not what I think of, or I agree of. And I talked to her about it, and it doesn't really change, so that's the frustrating part. And she does have a lot of strengths, but then she also has these other areas that I think she doesn't... I guess [that's] the frustrating part.” – Kennycia</p>	<p>relationship with their colleague. Most common external factors included factors related to decisions made by administration or policy including lack of training, inconsistent classroom leadership, and difficult scheduling.</p> <p>Example quote:</p> <p>“Normally I've had very little time to kind of connect with [my physical therapist]... this was a nice time where we could schedule a phone call or a Zoom call, and we would both get to be really creative and how are we going to deliver physical therapy online for a student?... so we had to be creative in that way and that was cool.” - Marie</p>
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Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the study was ensured by a rigorous, systematic, and transparent approach to data collection, analysis, and reporting. Trustworthiness in qualitative research indicates that the researcher's approach is consistent, accurate, and representative of the participants' experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). One way to establish trustworthiness in a qualitative research design is to use one or more strategies to check for the accuracy of the findings. The following validity strategies contributed to the credibility of this study's findings: member checking, peer review, expert review,

memo recording, and implementation of a disciplined, systematic, and transparent approach to data collection and analysis.

Member checking is a helpful strategy to establish trustworthiness and includes taking the final themes or descriptions of these data back to the participants and determining whether those participants feel they are accurate (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Member checking was used as a strategy to establish trustworthiness in this study. The second interview provided an opportunity to clarify any areas of ambiguity and retrieve more information on participants' experiences when needed.

Peer review was another strategy implemented in this study to ensure trustworthiness. Peer review or debriefing enhances the accuracy of a study by using a peer debriefer to review and ask questions about the qualitative study so that the account will resonate with people other than the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Peer review was achieved through my participation and involvement in research and writing groups with other doctoral students in the field of education. Peer review occurred during the data analysis, interpretation, and representation phase of this study.

Expert review was achieved through meeting with my advisors and dissertation committee members throughout the entire dissertation process. Memo recording occurred throughout the data collection process by taking handwritten field notes and organizing the notes in Zotero. These methods of trustworthiness ensured that a rigorous, systematic, and transparent approach to data collection, analysis, and reporting was executed.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Factors Influencing Relational Resilience in ECSE Practitioners

Two prominent factors emerged during the in-depth interviews that are important to highlight when understanding experiences influencing relational resilience in ECSE practitioners: (1) a strong motivation for working with children and families and (2) experiencing stress and job turnover. These factors were outside of the realm of the research questions for this study. However, they are included in the results chapter since the factors were a salient finding that emerged from the interviews and help to answer research question one of this study. The factors were mentioned by all of the participants and help to better understand the relational context, common stressors, and motivators that ECSE practitioners experience when working in the field of ECSE. I included the factors in this section to help answer research question one and better understand the features that characterize professional relationships in ECSE practitioners.

Motivation for Working with Children and Families

The majority of participants described a strong motivation for teaching young children when asked about their reasons for entering the field of ECSE. One common phrase throughout the interviews was the importance of “making a difference” in the lives of young children and families, especially during the impressionable years of early childhood. The teachers expanded on this concept in several ways. For example, Karissa described that she was particularly eager to help children who were considered difficult by other teachers and therefore would not otherwise have been supported to reach their full potential:

I wanted to give back and work with young children who others found hard to work with...I wanted to make a difference in the lives of these families and students to help them develop.

In this passage, Madison fleshed out the specific ways in which she wanted to help “bring [children’s] true selves to light”:

I’ve always loved working with children and when I had my first experience working with a child with special needs, I was just so inspired to learn more and to help them. I see them, who they are and I want to help bring their true selves to light. I know that with our expertise and knowledge, we can serve as the bridge and liaison between them and others. We can be their interpreters.

And finally, some teachers described their enjoyment of children’s humor and sense of discovery. They saw playful interactions with their students as a way to “make a difference” and be a positive role model for the children. Haley elaborated further by noting that these interactions enriched her own life as well:

My number one reason is because I love working with children. I always have. I love getting down on the floor with them and being silly, seeing the world from a new and exciting perspective... no matter what kind of day I’m having, it’s always brightened by spending time with my students. I love teaching them new things, learning along with them, making each other laugh, making a difference in

their lives and day, and just being a positive role model in their lives. Working with children is my passion and what fills me up.

Other participants reported that working with children who have disabilities was consistent with their values, including the importance of advocating for these children, making sure they were included in the classroom, teaching from a strength-based philosophy and advocating for disability awareness. Some of the ways that participants achieved these values were by providing visual schedules for children with autism, becoming involved in disability advocacy groups, and focusing on the unique traits that each child brings to the classroom.

Overall, the majority of participants described a strong motivation for making a difference in the lives of children with disabilities and families. Some also highlighted the ways in which their profession was consistent with important personal values. Furthermore, as we will see later in this chapter, the appealing aspects of working in the field of ECSE were reported to serve as a buffer when teachers encountered the high stress and challenges at work.

Experiencing Stress

Another shared experience across participants was experiencing stress while working in the field of ECSE. All participants articulated that they experienced a variety of stressors at work that made them feel stressed, fatigued, and frustrated. They also mentioned that these stressful conditions had led them to leave a previous job, or to consider leaving their current job.

The majority of participants noted that their daily job tasks and responsibilities were often emotionally, physically, and mentally exhausting. For example, Marie noted that the exhausting nature of her work left her depleted by the end of the day:

I could think about the reasons like why I might [burn out], and I think the number one thing that comes to mind for me and I mentioned it before, is energy and I always say in a Special Day Class classroom, the job is mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausting. I have nothing left in me at the end of the day.

In addition to the difficulty of the work itself, many participants also felt stressed by the non-relational responsibilities of the job including paperwork, large caseloads, and low pay. The majority of participants expressed that such responsibilities were stressful and hindered their ability to work effectively with their students. For example, Caitlin reported the burden of excessive paperwork and how it undermined her desire to stay in that job:

At the end of the school year, the majority of what we were doing was amendments for ESY [extended school year] and transition IEP [individual education plan] and IEPs. And all I felt like I was doing was sitting at my computer and doing paperwork. And I was like, if this is the future of my job, I cannot do this... it was so soul crushing and we all felt it.

Many participants also reported knowing a colleague who had changed positions or was planning to do so. For instance, Lucia had been teaching at her site for one year and revealed that, “there hasn’t been a teacher that has stayed on for more than a year. So I will be the first teacher that has been there for more than one year”.

Interestingly, while many interview participants reported having changed jobs in the past or were contemplating to do so in the near future, few of them expressed a desire to leave the field of ECSE. For instance, Isabella was in transition from one position to another when I interviewed her during the summer of 2020. When I asked about her reasons for changing positions and if she had thought about leaving the field altogether, she made a distinction between the way she felt about her current job and the way she felt about the field of teaching in general.

I had some students who really had a lot of needs. And it just got to be really overwhelming. And then unfortunately, I didn't have a very strong gen-ed [general education] teacher, and just a lot of the responsibilities kind of fell on my shoulders to keep things running, to keep a quality classroom going, and I got a little burned out... so I thought, maybe I should try a little something different for a little while... I haven't felt like leaving altogether, but I definitely think this year, when I was kind of feeling that way [burnout]... in terms of the field altogether, I haven't really lost my passion for what I do. But sometimes I get the [feeling] like, time for a change.

Given the emotional, physical, and mental stressors of the field of ECSE reported by the participants, many participants shared that although they love working with children and families that they plan on changing positions in the field sometime in the future. The most common reasons stated by the participants were the stress of working in the ECSE classroom and lack of external supports.

In summary, many teachers I spoke with described their work as exhausting and emphasized its mental, physical, and emotional toll. However, despite these stressors, the majority expressed a desire to stay in the field. In the subsequent section I turn to the factors that contributed to their willingness to continue in this work despite its demands.

ECSE Practitioners' Experiences of Relational Resilience

The first research question for this study was what features characterize the professional relationships of ECSE practitioners? The themes that emerged from the first research question were mutual empathy, courage, and empowerment. These three concepts are what Jordan (1992) believes are the growth-fostering connections in relationships. Each concept is central to relational resilience and intertwines with the other concept in a dynamic process when connection in a relationship exists. The concepts emerged during the interviews and were guided by the deductive analysis from relational resilience theory. I will describe the central themes that emerged from my study in more detail below.

Mutual Empathy

According to relational resilience theory, mutual empathy is defined as the dynamic that occurs when both people contribute to the growth of each other psychologically and to the relationship. In this study, I examined how teachers in ECSE experience or fail to experience relational resilience while moving or not moving beyond the stress of being a teacher. The construct of mutual empathy in the workplace emerged as a key finding from the interviews. All of the participants reported that they

experienced some aspect of this construct in relationships with their colleagues. In this section I will indicate which elements of mutual empathy were highlighted by this group of teachers. The core element of mutual empathy according to Jordan is that individuals in a relationship feel reciprocity that fosters commitment to and responsibility for each other's wellbeing and growth (Jordan 1992; Le Cornu, 2009).

General Sense of Caring. Some participants described a general sense of caring among their colleagues. For example, Caitlin noted how she and her colleagues “want the best for each other” and stated that noticing everyone’s struggles helps them realize that they have similar challenges.

We really do want the best for each other. We're all aware that we have a really hard job and our jobs are all different because of the population of kids that we work with, so it doesn't always look the same. Some things maybe look easier at times but then really, when you hear them talk they're like no, that's not easy. It just takes a lot of listening and I think seeing that everyone is struggling to do their job well and it just doesn't always look the same for us.

Communication. Other participants moved beyond this general sense of caring to describe specific ways that they were able to talk openly about difficulties in their jobs including handling large and challenging caseloads, dealing with challenging behaviors in children, and engaging in bureaucratic or administrative tasks. For instance, Karissa described having these conversations and noted they were helpful both to her and her colleagues:

But when I do feel tired, it's just helpful when I have someone to chat with or just talk it out with. So my special education teacher, we do that a lot. She'll tell me when she's having a hard time, or I'll tell her when I'm having a hard time, and we'll just chat about it after the kids leave.

Isabella emphasized the unique benefit of sharing her experiences with a colleague rather than a friend or family member with little understanding of her challenges. These conversations allow her to enjoy a “little success” and feel confident in her work:

I think even connecting with like friends and family about it while they're like, "Oh, that's great" It's different because they're not experiencing it, but being able to say to your colleagues like, "Man, I'm celebrating this little success," and they're like, "Dude, I totally get it." We share my success and just enjoying moments together or the opposite of like, "Hey, I'm really struggling with this." To have someone just say like, "Yeah, I get it." You know they get it... it really does reignite things when you have a chance to bounce things off of each other or just listen to each other, you feel more confident in your work. You know you're not alone. You know that, "Okay. Everyone's struggling with this and I'm not so hard on myself about it." Just learning from each other. I just feel like it just helps in just growth like that.

Receiving Helpful Advice. Isabella also highlighted the caring response of colleagues who urge her to take care of herself when she is getting tired and experiencing “burnout.”

I think it helps too with like burnout. I don't know. It kind of keeps you grounded and we all go through periods where we're like, "I don't think I want to do it anymore." Just having someone who understands, validate it for you and maybe say like, "Hey, why don't you go home on time today?" Or sometimes my colleagues would say, "You need to close your computer or leave it here, and just walk away from it, take a few days and recharge when you come back." I need someone to say that like, "Put the computer away. Don't put it in your bag. Put it in your desk drawer." ... I think that's huge. Especially in the field, because I think they probably get it too like, "Oh, I've had moments like that."

Receiving Direct Assistance. The participants in this study also described various ways in which colleagues help each other by giving direct assistance such as, for example, pitching in to complete a difficult task, assisting in their classroom, or helping each other learn a new skill. Karissa offered one example of this type of assistance in an anecdote about how her colleague offered to switch classrooms with her.

Because we're both special education teachers, there are sometimes where we'll switch classrooms, so I'll go into hers and she'll come into mine. Yeah, sometimes I'll just hang out in there. I liked hanging out there in the morning, so if I don't have a teacher or a parent meeting or anything, I'll go hang out, play with her kids for 15, 20 minutes, then I'll go do what I have to do.

Another example of direct assistance was provided by Kennycia, who described reaching out to a colleague about related teaching experiences and receiving help by brainstorming ideas for activities that she could try with the children in her own classroom:

We have basically the same schedule. She's doing summer school too, virtually, and we have two groups, a three-year-old group and a four-year-old group. Four and five, and the three-year-old group we're really struggling to motivate them and everything, and I don't know, sometimes I'll just text her like, "How did the threes go?" Or, "I did this with the threes and they really enjoyed it." ... I just sometimes think of her because I know we're both struggling the same.

Teaching and Learning from Each Other. Some participants mentioned getting help to master an important professional objective. Whitney expressed relief when a colleague helped her develop Individual Education Plan (IEP) goals for some of her students during her first years of teaching.

In the beginning, I did feel like I was not where I needed to be, especially trying to write IEPs, and [my coach] has been really great where I'm just like, "I think these goals are wrong. I don't know if they're worded properly and they're not. But knowing that there's people who are also in the same category to where they're like, "Don't worry about it. I've been there before. Let's see. What is it that you're focusing on? How many times do you want to achieve it?" to where now I feel a lot more comfortable with even IEPs, versus before I was just like, "Oh, my God, it's 30 pages." It's a big difference now where I just slide through it now... So...I haven't been burnt out yet.

Whitney also described the rewards of sharing resources with other teachers, and aspired to have a "model classroom" for their benefit:

We even have our own Google Drive, where if I create a visual, I immediately share it. Like, "If you guys need this, here, you guys go." And vice versa. They do the same things. So I think as of right now, I don't see myself leaving the district. I want to be in their shoes to where three, four years, my classroom is a model classroom. If a new teacher came in, one of the coaches could say, "Hey, I know a teacher who's been in your shoes and has a classroom for you to see." Let's go for it.

For some participants such as Emily, helping other teachers resolve a difficult problem was stimulating. Emily also found it rewarding to be treated as a valued colleague.

Early on I realized how important and valuable, and almost required, having a supportive work environment is. Then friendly, willing to help each other. So much of autism is unknown and complicated and like a puzzle. First and foremost, I process everything through other people and I find that a lot of educators do that. Having people around me professionally that are excited by that and willing to do that. It's not always just me going to them, but they're coming to me. Thinking about somebody and kids outside of what I'm working with every single minute of the day. That pretty [much] became a non-negotiable moving forward professionally.

Overall, the participants in my study experienced mutual empathy through a variety of expressions including connecting with colleagues during stressful teaching situations, openly talking about their difficulties, helping one another in teaching tasks, and looking out for each other's best interests. The participants in my study exhibited Jordan's construct of mutual empathy by detailing their various experiences and voicing times when they felt connected to their colleagues through mutuality. In the following section, the second construct of relational resilience, development of courage, will be explored.

Development of Courage

The second construct of relational resilience is development of courage. According to relational resilience theory, one clear benefit of experiencing mutual empathy with one or more individuals is that the experience can in turn foster the individual's courage, as expressed, for example, in feeling able to remain calm and engaged in interactions with an angry parent rather than retreating. According to Jordan (2012), courage is defined as the capacity to move into situations in spite of feeling fear or hesitation. Nine out of 10 participants in my study described how they were able to feel more courageous as a result of the support they received from colleagues with whom they had formed mutually empathetic relationships.

A number of participants reported on situations that had shaken their confidence and described how a colleague's support had helped them overcome their fear or anxiety. In this poignant account, Lucia described how her interactions with a challenging child became even more stressful as a result of the child's father's responses.

I had one student that came in in the beginning of the year. And I think there was a lot of problems with why he ended up in my class. I don't think the class was a proper placement for him...there was a lot of red flags for me that was like huh, I

wonder why is this happening? And at first I was asking questions to parents. It's mostly dad because mom worked full time and so it was dad that I interacted more with. And so at first it started off as questions, like the toileting situation. And then, one of the other kids pushed him to the ground and was stomping on him. And so the school has policies, right? When this happens, this is what you do et cetera. So I followed procedure, and it was just a total backlash. And I got yelled at by the parent and [he] wrote this huge email to me and my supervisor at like three in the morning, which is also kind of a red flag. And just all these things about who I am, what I'm doing, it was just all assumptions I would say.

And so after that, it was very, very difficult for me to talk about what was happening in the class with [the child]. When he had a fever one day, I called to let dad know because that's the policy. We can't have kids that has fevers in school. And it was just like, I mean, I was like terrified to call. And it was just like, right when [the dad] came in, he didn't say a word to me, totally ignored me, grabbed his stuff and was like, "let's go". It was just very passive aggressive, almost. So yeah, I would say that that's a fear that I have a lot of, and I know that I was like, your years go by and you're going to have these different situations. But because it was my first big one and I didn't really understand if it was me, or what I had done specifically. So it was pretty scary.

Lucia developed several strategies for alleviating the anxiety she felt as a result of these difficult interactions with the child's father. She also revealed that it was not only the father's aggressiveness that was "scary," but also her concern that she might lose her job.

And from then on, I made sure to CC my supervisor on every email, make sure to have a third person there when I'm talking to dad, just kind of a way to watch myself because I didn't want to have things be said that aren't true or whatever it may have been. I just was worried about my position, and am I going to get fired over this or whatever. So yes, I would say that was the biggest fear or hesitation.

A key point here is that Lucia was able to continue interacting with the angry father in part due to her relationships with colleagues. Lucia's colleagues noticed her distress and responded empathically, sharing their own similar experiences and urging her not to leave her job over these incidents. They also made a point of being physically present when she had to interact with the father.

I definitely had support [from my teaching team]... they were like, "Oh my God, are you okay? What's going on?" And then whatever. And so whenever the dad [did] drop off, pick up, or whatever it may be. They made sure they... [were] there with me. And I know it's weird, but we almost kind of bonded over it, because they had experiences like that, where they've gotten yelled at by parents, or whatever it may be. And they were like, we don't want to freak you out, this happens sometimes, and we don't want you to quit over this. And things like that. So they definitely made sure to be there with me, or they were like, oh, I'll go talk to them, or to him, or whatever, something like that. You know? So I felt super supported.

Whitney shared a similar story about how a colleague helped her overcome the fear that she would have to leave her job over a distressing incident. In this case, she temporarily lost track of a child during a field trip:

It's one of the worst examples, but it still hinders me. So, before I came with the district, I had the babies, the toddlers and my mindset was you teach them young, so that way, when they get to preschool, they're aware, like you don't run if you go outside of the gate, you sit down, you say please and thank you ... You give them the fundamentals early on. So I was one who would take 18-month-olds and two-year-olds and be like, "Let's go for a walk. Let's go down to the community bus stop." And things like that so that they could be exposed to what was around them.

Whitney then described changing positions to an older classroom and being a teacher in her own classroom for the first time.

So when I jumped in to be like, "Oh my God, I'm a teacher of my own classroom," I'm like, "Children! [Museum of Play]. Let's go!" And we a lot of people were like, "You're going where?" And the gen ed [general education] Pre-K was like, "No, we don't leave campus." And I'm like, "What do you mean we don't leave? Let's go!" And we ended up having so many families sign up [to accompany us] that we have a 1:1 ratio. And I felt perfect. And I felt so honored and amazed that so many people were just like, "Thank you so much for coordinating this. My child has never gone on a field trip." And I felt so honored and important.

These initial feelings of excitement evaporated when Whitney lost track of one of the children for a couple of minutes:

And then I lost one of my kiddos. The one time I was responsible for, I didn't want to keep holding his hand. If you're going to explore, you're going to explore. I let go. And when I turned around, he was gone. He chased a butterfly, which is amazing that he was able to see something in real life versus in a book. I went from feeling so important to like, "Oh my God, I'm getting fired." With all the parents were there. And then I had to come back, I had to tell the principal, which led to calling Licensing. Then I had to call the parent and I'm like, "Oh my gosh."

Upon hearing what had happened to her son on the field trip, the child's mother understandably became quite angry. Her anger was very distressing to Whitney, and her distress was compounded by her own self-criticism:

And the parent yelled at me so bad that I cried. And then she sent this amazing email afterwards that was very apologetic. Basically it was just saying, "I'm so sorry that I reacted the way that I did, but I was scared." And I totally validated her feelings because as a mother, you never want to hear somebody say, "I lost sight of your child." But I really did. I felt like I was nothing, and why did they choose me to be that teacher? And I didn't want to go back. And it was the beginning of the school year, and I'm just like, "Why would I think to do this?"

Whitney's colleagues offered her support as she expressed distress from the field trip incident by sharing similar experiences and helping her realize that she was not the first or only teacher to lose track of a child.

So I think that was the part where I felt like everybody was always watching me.

"And everybody told her, 'Don't do it.' And she did it" type thing. Like that "I told

you so" feeling. That was really, really bummed, but once again, I had my coach, I had the SLP [speech and language pathologist] that was just like, "It comes and it goes." And my coach was like, "I used to be a SPED [special education] teacher before you. I can tell you how many kids that I misplaced for a second." And she made it more of that you had the child for four or five hours. Imagine the parent that has them for 24 hours. I'm sure they lost their child for a brief second. And it just brought my level really down. Like I was saying, it was a horrible example, but that was the worst feeling ever.

Whitney then described how the emotional distress from this experience began to consume her thoughts at home and affected interactions with her husband.

So I felt little. I went from being so big to like, "Oh, my God, this is so amazing," to, "Oh gosh. Oh gosh." And literally for about two, three weeks straight, to where it was affecting you at home because my husband was just like, "Let it go. Don't worry about it." And I'm like, "But that can't be me. I've never." And he was like, "So you did. Okay. So what?"

But it was really hindering more of the house because there was so much of ... Every moment, it would pop up in my head. That was our conversation. And sometimes it was at dinner. It was one of those things where we're just like work needs to stay at work and home life needs to be home life. But that's how much I was beyond paranoid that the parents were going to start gossiping about me and like, "Is she even credentialed? Why is she here?" And then I thought that the boss, the principal, was literally going to be like, "That's it, we can't have her," and HR was going to give me that call, like, "Hey, you're terminated." So it was a lot. It was a big process... my mind thought was, "Leave before they can fire you", because I've never been terminated from a job, so it was one of those like, "Run while you can", and in the back of my head, I knew I could go back to the nonprofit where I used to work. I knew I could be there if anything failed.

Whitney's colleagues offered an opportunity to share her stressful experience and receive encouragement for coping with her anxiety.

But there's certain people in my group messages that are also SPED [special education] teachers. And one of them went through the credentialing program that I did, and also did her MA two years before I did. And then there's two more who just did their MA with me. And we're all within the district. So we're literally in this group message, where it's just like, "Don't worry about it." And I had one of those girls that told me, because I was just like, "I feel like everybody's judging me. I can't do anything wrong? It doesn't make sense." And she was like, "You know what? For my first year, do you know what I did? I literally held the kids all day that were crying. I didn't teach; I just held the kids and tried to comfort." And they've been with the district three, four years. So they've been in a little bit longer than I have. And another one was just like, "Oh my God. My first year was horrible as far as the labeling and getting everything up." But now when you look at their classrooms, they're such modeled classrooms that it was like okay

Another way in which relationships seemed to foster a sense of courage occurred when participants were asked to take on a new task at work. During these experiences,

participants developed courage in their teaching tasks when they felt support from their colleagues. For example, Karissa expressed:

I think when something new is thrown at us, I feel like taking the time to chat about it with one of the general education teachers or my SPED [special education] teacher or even my content specialist, I think that just helps us to talk it out... that makes it more doable.

Additionally, Emily shared that she began to doubt her own teaching abilities due to criticism that she received from a difficult colleague. She was able to regain a sense of courage slowly after her principal forcefully argued against the criticism:

It was really hard and it broke me down and I was like, "I'm not coming back next year." However, it was things like my principal being like, "Look, how could you even think about... I watched your circle time twice a week for 180 days. How could you at all think that she had any validity when you're doing what I'm seeing and what I'm observing and what parents are seeing, and then fighting really hard to get into your classroom for?" When someone says stuff like that it's strong. It took me a really long time to believe that [what] my principal said was true, was real.

Madison described an experience in which positive feedback from administrators at her school supported her own views about teaching, even if others in the school had criticized her principles:

I think my fear kind of ties back into my transitioning [to a new position]. Since I came from a private preschool, I was very used to things being done a certain way, and my teaching philosophy is really different than public school. And so that was my biggest fear. Like, "Oh, what's going to happen if I change it? How were my paras going to react? How are families going to react?"

Madison revealed that her mentor teacher helped her develop courage to teach in a way that was consistent with her philosophy by offering validation of her beliefs when she entered her new position.

...And for that fear, what helped the most was my coach [mentor teacher]. Like I mentioned that she has the exact same philosophy as I do, and so that helped tremendously, because she validated my philosophy. She was like, "No, your philosophy is hundred percent right. Play is a hundred percent good for kids." And so I didn't feel as fearful to make the choices....

Madison further stated that receiving the trust and support of the principal and assistant principal were also helpful developing her courage to teach in a way that was consistent with her philosophy.

Yeah, my assistant principal and my principal both were very kind of like, "We trust you. We know you went to school for this." And saying stuff like, "We hired you because we saw potential in you, and we see you with the kids. We know you're good with the kids. We trust your judgment." And so hearing stuff like that, and just knowing that I have their unconditional support also helps.

In summary, the participants in my study described two types of experiences in which supportive relationships with their colleagues enabled them to be courageous at work. Some demonstrated courage when they were able to persist in their work despite frightening or unsettling experiences with children, parents, or colleagues. Other discussed the courage involved in taking on new or complex responsibilities for which

they felt somewhat unprepared, fearful, or hesitant. In both cases, their courageous response was facilitated by the empathy and engagement they received from the colleagues whom they had formed a close relationship.

Empowerment

According to relational resilience theory, empowerment is defined as connections that enable participants to experience energy, creativity, and flexibility (Jordan, 2012). For example, teachers may feel empowered in relationships with colleagues when they are able to bounce teaching ideas off of each other and brainstorm in a community that is non-judgmental (Le Cornu, 2009). Empowerment is different from development of courage since development of courage applies to an individual becoming more confident in situations when they initially feel fear or hesitation. Empowerment applies to building positive capacities such as flexibility or creativity as a result of a growth-fostering relationship. Nine out of ten participants reported that they experienced empowerment in relationships with their colleagues. Participants indicated experiencing empowerment during collaborative interactions with colleagues and times when they felt support from a colleague.

My participants identified various ways in which they had experienced a sense of empowerment as a result of collaborating with colleagues. For instance, Marie described a difficult situation in which she and her colleagues collaborated in a way that helped her to act in ways that were creative and forceful in her teaching:

I can think of a student I had a couple years ago... the child had a ton of potential, and the family didn't see it, from my eyes they didn't see it, and he was starting to have a lot of health issues. And it appeared to be neglect.

So in the classroom we were trying to do everything we could to help this child within the four hours that he was with us. And I specifically remember being in a group text being with my physical therapist, occupational therapist, speech therapist, and the school nurse, and we were just constantly trying to approach the situation from different angles.

So, whether the PT would reach out to a family she had worked with prior to get equipment donated, because, again, the family didn't see the need for it but he needed it. I would call the doctor and speak to her and address problems that I felt like were relevant to the classroom and his health. If I weren't able to get through to her then the speech therapist would reach out to someone else kind of on his medical team to support me and then try to get different answers.

And we ended up being really successful, the kid ended up in the hospital. It was a good thing, and we were able to kind of speak to hospital staff and he got everything that he needed, and he eventually moved on to kindergarten, but we checked in all the time and he's doing really, really well and succeeding.

Kind of what we had wanted in the classroom, but kind of had a little bit of an obstacle and needed to... find a way around it... that was the first time in my role

as special education teacher that I had to do things that I never thought I would do. Like, call a parent and be like, "If you don't take him to the hospital right now I'm going to call the ambulance, because he's not breathing well." And calling the child's doctors, which sometimes is in our role and sometimes it's not.

Kennycia also noted that one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching is interacting with a collaborative team. Such interactions helped Kennycia feel inspired, energized, and creative, as she describes here:

I think at my job, I feel the most fulfilled is... when we meet as just teachers, or the special education team. I don't know why, I just really enjoy hearing the OT [occupational therapist], talk about what they're doing... there's scientific background behind it. I feel really empowered by him, and it makes me want to be better at my job here like the APE [adapted physical education] teacher. And you know you're at an IEP meeting and they're like, "Oh, you know that child is doing this and this." I'm like, "Wow, I don't know." I'm just so impressed by them.

Moreover, Marie spoke of the value that meeting with her team gives her and how it energizes her:

So, we sit next to each other after the kids leave their desks, and we just talk a lot about like certain kids, or experiences that we're having with families, and consequently end up getting less work done sometimes because we're researching and bouncing ideas off of each other, and we're like we should go back to school and learn about this... So, I think I would say that's one of the best parts of the relationship is we're always trying to help each other grow.

In addition to working together to solve problems, another common experience that came up was participants feeling empowered when they received emotional support and encouragement from their colleagues. For example, Emily noted the following about her principal:

To hear that my principal thinks highly of my program and can speak specifically about pieces of it and catches little moments and gives a lot of positive feedback, that I think is the single most driving factor for me to, like I said, work my hardest and balance the hardships of the job.

Furthermore, Isabella described how she felt empowered during supportive interactions with colleagues, especially during challenging times:

I would say there were times when we were finding that our classroom schedule just wasn't working. And so, the gen-ed teacher I worked with, we talked, because she was really frustrated and feeling kind of helpless. I was feeling a little frustrated. And so we decided, okay, let's take this week. Let's look at the whole day, and really pay attention to what's happening. Because there's a chance, maybe we have a magnifying glass, and we're looking too closely at certain things, and think they're happening all the time but they're actually not, kind of thing... And so we really sat down and planned out how we were going to look at that. And then kind of reconvened, shared what we noticed. And we did this with our paras as well, but she and I took the lead on it. And then just met, and really talked about, "Hey, what time of the day are you really feeling frustrated?" For us, for the kids, all of that. And so we made some changes to the environment, and we made some changes to the room, and then we moved forward.

In addition, Lucia mentioned experiencing empowerment through positive interactions with colleagues:

And I liked that there's a space for that. So they're not like, when I'm already stressed and feeling down, they're not like, "Oh, well, this is what you should work on too." So I also like that. I feel like that also energizes me because they're not putting me down when I'm already feeling down. And just sharing different maybe she'll get me something for lunch, or the speech therapist likes to workout and I like to work out, so we share different things that we can do. And just sharing good positive stories, when I'm not there. Because I think that they know that that makes me feel okay, that I'm doing something right.

In summary, the first research question of my study examined what features characterize the professional relationships of ECSE practitioners. The majority of participants in this study reported experiencing the three components of relational resilience while navigating the stress of teaching. The main components of relational resilience described by participants included the three themes of mutual empathy, development of courage, and empowerment. The first theme, mutual empathy, refers to the dynamic that occurs when both people contribute to the growth of each other and the relationship. Common experiences of mutual empathy included experiencing a general sense of caring, communicating clearly with colleagues, and receiving as well as giving helpful advice and assistance.

When these teachers sensed that mutual empathy had developed among their colleagues, they reported developing courage (i.e., the capacity to move into situations when an individual feels fear or hesitation). Two experiences in which mutual empathy with colleagues facilitated the development of courage included persisting during difficult interpersonal situations with parents and moving forward to develop and refine a teaching style that was consistent with one's teaching philosophy.

The third theme that emerged was empowerment (i.e., connections that enable participants to experience energy, creativity, and flexibility). Those participants who had mutually empathetic connections with their colleagues reported feeling able to come up with effective and innovative inventions in difficult teaching situations.

Factors That Promoted ECSE Practitioners' Resilience

The second research question for this study was *what are the key factors of professional relationships that seem to promote ECSE practitioners' resilience with respect to their work?*

Collectively, participants shared a variety of key factors that made them feel connected to their colleagues while experiencing the stress from teaching in the field of ECSE. The most commonly reported factors were shared personal characteristics that lead to mutuality with their colleagues. Shared personal characteristics included positive attitude, authenticity, strong communication, flexibility, open mindedness, shared values, sense of humor, vulnerability, and responsiveness. Another factor included friendship that occurred outside of the work environment. The majority of these factors were reported to help teachers move beyond the stress of teaching and feel energized in their work with children and families. Additionally some of these factors encouraged teachers to stay at their current position.

Shared Personal Characteristics

Key factors related to shared personal characteristics include shared beliefs, attributes, or personality traits that help a participant feel connected to a colleague. Participants reported feeling connected to colleagues particularly when they shared values relating to their teaching.

For participants whose teaching was informed by a strength-based perspective, it was exciting and rewarding to work with others who shared their views. For example, Emily described feeling connected to colleagues with whom she shared an open-mind and strength-based perspective in the following example:

When a professional has a more open mind about instruction in terms of positive experiences and seeing those subtle differences or subtle progress notes versus constantly thinking about what's missing or how we need to shape this kid into what fits into our society, I think that that's another point in terms of how I connect with professionals.

Emily further identified a specific connection she feels with her speech and language pathologist since they both share an open mind and focus on the strengths of their students:

My speech pathologist is coming back and she and I just did happy hour yesterday over Zoom. I can use her because there's something about someone that also views students in the same way. I would say that I think that's probably the most common denominator that helps me connect when someone speaks. Again, it's really easy for adults talking about kids with special needs to talk about it in a negative way or a deficit based way, or "This kid is so frustrating or this child is so hard to work with," versus "my student is struggling" or they had such a hard day, but for these 20 minutes they were learning. You could tell he was so excited and engaged. It's just a glaring difference to me and it's an alarm bell, almost a shiver when people... it's subtle, but when people talk about it one way versus the other. My speech pathologist right now can sit and chat about all of the fun things that a kiddo did that might be like, "My kiddos are pretty impacted by their special need." A Joe Schmoe down the street might never see the progress that this teacher could.

The value of sharing a teaching philosophy was also articulated by Isabella, although she did not describe her philosophy in detail. Rather, she reported feeling connected to her teaching team because their shared teaching philosophy facilitates collaboration:

It's like, you're synchronized. You just kind of know what each other's doing, it's just... picking up where the other one leaves off, or just being able to just jump right in and support without... You're just in a really natural way. Things just flow.

Participants also noted that they felt connected to colleagues when their colleagues shared similar personal interests outside of work. For example, Marie and her colleague had much in common and even became roommates after working together. Marie indicated the following:

In terms of feeling connected at work...we have similar beliefs about what it means to educate a child with needs....we are similar in age have similar interests outside of work. We have the same core values about educating, but different classroom management styles, but we support each others' styles and talk about the pros and cons openly with each other.

Participants also expressed that they felt connected to colleagues when their colleagues shared personal values. For example, Lucia revealed feeling connected to a colleague that shared her similar cultural values:

I'm Mexican and she's Mexican. So there's also that cultural thing that we kind of understand each other and how to talk to each other. Respect is a huge thing for us...But even when we were talking about, for next year we should do this and not like just already thinking it gets me excited because it's like, yes, we're on the same page here. This isn't just a job to you. And I needed someone to be like that with me because this isn't just a job for me either. This is something that I love to do.

And finally, participants reported that they felt connected to colleagues who shared their work ethic. For instance, Kennycia explained how she feels connected to colleagues that share similar work ethic:

I feel like having the same type of work ethic, everyone's working hard and doing what they need to do and taking it seriously. I feel like this is important, having the same ideas of what teaching early childhood should be like.

Friendship Outside the Workplace

Participants who had formed friendships with their colleagues that extended a friendship-outside of the job believed that these friendships with colleagues enabled them to work effectively with their colleagues. Some participants had good workplace connections with colleagues with whom they had established a friendship outside of work. Caitlin articulated this point in the following example:

I do [feel connected to my colleagues] because I just feel like we spend time, we'll text outside of work or hang out occasionally and stuff like that so I do feel like there's a connection there.

Likewise, Kathy reported that she felt connected to a colleague that she identified as a friend:

I think being able to connect through work, but also like, "Hey, I want to text you after hours," and be like, "Hey, you're also my friend." I think that definitely helps strengthen that relationship.

Furthermore, Karissa shared that she felt the closest to a colleague that she gets along with outside of work:

I think it's the strongest bond with her because me and her, we work really closely together at work but we'll also do stuff outside of work together.

In summary, participants in this study reported experiencing a variety of key factors that promoted relational resilience in the field of ECSE. Two themes emerged from the interviews and were described as helpful in feeling connected to colleagues and moving beyond the stress of teaching. These two themes included shared personal characteristics and friendship outside the workplace. Participants shared that they

experienced feeling connected to their colleagues when they and their colleagues possessed shared personal characteristics. The most frequently described shared personal characteristics of colleagues included having a team-oriented personality, strength-based perspective, authentic and supportive communication style, and similar teaching values. Participants additionally expressed that they felt connected to colleagues and resilient in their teaching when they were able to form a friendship with them outside of the work environment. The reported shared personal characteristics and external factor of friendship outside of work were described as promoting relational resilience in ECSE practitioners.

Factors That Undermined ECSE Practitioners' Resilience

The third and final research question for this study was *what are the key factors of professional relationships that seem to undermine ECSE practitioners' resilience with respect to their work?*

Personal Characteristics

The majority of participants (9 out of 10) described personal characteristics of colleagues that made them feel more disconnected in their professional relationships, particularly with those who had little willingness or ability to entertain alternative points of view about teaching. One such factor was the characteristic of being inflexible or negative in a collaborative situation.

For example, Isabella described feeling disconnected to her speech therapist who was unwilling to consider Isabella's point of view about engaging with children who need assistance with verbal communication. Isabella was in her second year of teaching which made her particularly vulnerable to the negative attitude of the speech therapist. Isabella revealed the following example:

I would talk [to my speech therapist] about, "Hey, I've worked on programs where kids use either sign or AAC or some kind of alternative picture exchange. Some kind of alternatives to verbally communicating. Can we get something going?" And she would tell me, "That's not practical. Out in the real world, people don't use pictures or what not." And my gut told me, this is not okay... And I was new. It was my second year. And I knew in my gut that that's not right. No, that's not true. But I definitely hesitated about speaking up. I didn't want to rock the boat, I didn't want to be wrong. I didn't want to upset anybody.

Likewise, Emily reported feeling disconnected from a colleague who did not seem open to her ideas of teaching. She described feeling stressed by this experience and that it caused her to feel conflicted in her teaching because she had to practice a teaching style that she did not believe in in order to appease a colleague. She expressed the following:

The challenge that I have [with my BCBA colleague] is that she speaks to me in a way that implies that I don't know what I'm doing. She's called my classroom babysitting. She said, "The kids are doing nothing. You are not running IEP goals. These kids need to... they're in this program for this reason. You need to be doing XYZ." We've tried to talk through it, but the way that she speaks to me shuts me down... The challenges is because I believe she's looking for things through this

one lens, and I philosophically disagree with that... I do feel I sometimes need a double standard in terms of, or a double life in terms of who I am with the students behind closed doors, with just the classroom and getting to do the fun. And then having to prove that we've learned is two separate things for me, that I don't feel are totally related.

Moreover, Kennycia described feeling frustrated over a conflict that she experienced with her aide because she was unwilling to be flexible in her teaching ideas:

I would say that one of my aides... It's just not working. And a lot of things she says to the kids, I don't... It's just not what I think of, or I agree with. And I talked to her about it, and it doesn't really change, so that's the frustrating part. And she does have a lot of strengths, but then she also has these other areas that I think she doesn't... I think she... I guess the frustrating part is, I have an idea of how I want the class to go, but she has her own idea.

External Factors

Participants explained ways in which factors external to personal characteristics of the participants and their colleagues hindered their sense of connection with colleagues. In most cases, these external factors were related to school-level policies and practices that created a difficult teaching environment. The most commonly reported external factors were lack of training on how to lead paraprofessionals, inconsistent classroom leadership due to frequent job turnover in ECSE, and difficult scheduling.

Lack of Training. A common external factor described by participants was the lack of personnel preparation training in which they received on collaboration with paraprofessionals. This feeling of unpreparedness and lack of leadership skills often resulted in participants experiencing difficulty in establishing mutuality in relationships with their paraprofessionals. For example, Marie described how, as a new teacher, she had to navigate the challenging task of leading a group of paraprofessionals:

I think in terms of paraprofessionals, specifically, that's something I'd had trouble with in the past. They don't teach you how to be a boss... And so, when I jumped in things were chaotic, the paras [paraprofessionals] were kind of running the classroom, so I think I had two fears when I had jumped in, is that the fear of being the boss of other adults. And it still is a little bit of a fear and something I've worked on every day because I [have] a master's degree and I'm the teacher of the classroom, and my paras [paraprofessionals], every single para [paraprofessional] I've ever had has been significantly older than me and has been in that specific classroom 10, 20 years.

Inconsistent Classroom Leadership. Participants also reported finding it challenging to connect in relationships with their paraprofessionals due to inconsistent classroom leadership of lead classroom teachers. Some participants indicated that frequent job turnover in classroom leadership caused hostility in their professional environments. For instance, Madison elaborated on the low morale among the paraprofessionals at her first job due to high teacher turnover prior to her being hired:

When I first started working, I had entered it in an environment in which the class had shuffled through a lot of teachers. And so the environment and the atmosphere I entered were very hostile because the paras [paraprofessionals] weren't really trustworthy of the teachers and they felt like the teacher was just going to leave.

Difficult Scheduling. Another factor that hindered participants' ability to create mutual empathy in their relationships with colleagues was the lack of time to talk with them in a calm and uninterrupted setting. Interestingly, this problem was identified as a result of changes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. As noted earlier, this study was conducted during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and in the summer of 2020, and many participants had recently switched to online learning. One common experience they reported was having more time to connect with their colleagues as a result of this new arrangement. For example, Emily revealed how online learning enabled her and her staff to find more time to be present with her colleagues:

Our job is so draining and it's usually five hours of people pulling on you and needing you and sitting in your lap and 45 minutes of crying at least, and getting instructions and leading paraprofessionals and all of that...there's such little things that we were looking forward to... I think that [online learning] fostered both the professional relationship and the personal relationship... the fact that the job wasn't so draining, it was a lot more connecting with friends and colleagues and more fun, social stuff. Granted, all through the computer, but still far more present for it.

Moreover, Marie indicated a similar experience in which she felt more connected to the school's physical therapist due to the increased frequency of interaction:

Normally I've had very little time to kind of connect with [the school's physical therapist]... this was a nice time where we could schedule a phone call or a Zoom call, and we would both get to be really creative and how are we going to deliver physical therapy online for a student?... so we had to be creative in that way and that was cool. So I would say, in terms of people who are not on site all the time, I've probably had a little more online interaction with them. So that was really fun.

In summary, participants in this study reported experiencing a variety of factors that hindered their relational resilience as ECSE practitioners. Two themes emerged from the interviews and were described as inhibiting connection to colleagues and moving beyond the stress of teaching. These two themes included shared personal characteristics and friendship outside the workplace. Participants reported feeling disconnected to their colleagues when their colleagues possessed certain personal characteristics, particularly, being inflexible or negative in a collaborative situation. Participants additionally noted finding it difficult to connect to colleagues due to external factors outside of their relationships with a colleague including lack of training, inconsistent classroom leadership, and difficult scheduling.

Summary of Results

There were several key findings that emerged from this study's data analysis. The participants indicated that they experienced the three components of relational resilience while moving or not moving beyond the stress of teaching. The three components of relational resilience included mutual empathy, development of courage, and empowerment. Overall, participants that experienced any of these three components of relational resilience felt more connected to their colleagues and more resilient to the stress encountered while working in the field of ECSE.

In addition, there were key factors that emerged from the interviews that were described as promoting relational resilience. The most common factors to promote relational resilience in ECSE practitioners in this study included shared personal characteristics and friendships with colleagues outside the workplace. The majority of participants reported feeling connected to colleagues with whom they shared a positive attitude, and who were authentic, open-minded, vulnerable, and responsive.

Participants reported feeling disconnected from colleagues when specific factors were present. The most commonly reported factor that undermined relational resilience in these ECSE practitioners was working with a colleague who was not flexible enough to consider the point of view or belief system of the participant. Additionally, the external factors of lack of training, inconsistent classroom leadership, and difficult scheduling were also reported.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the experiences of ECSE practitioners and the role that mutually empathetic and empowering relationships play in ECSE practitioners' resilience. This chapter contains discussion and future research possibilities to help answer the following research questions: *(1) what features characterize the professional relationships of ECSE practitioners? (2) what are the key factors of professional relationships of ECSE practitioners that seem to promote their resilience with respect to their work? and (3) what are the key factors of professional relationships that seem to undermine their resilience with respect to their work?*

This chapter includes an overview of this study's major findings that offer a contribution to the literature on relational resilience in ECSE practitioners. Implications of the results for theory, research, and practice are also addressed. This chapter concludes with limitations of the study and a final conclusion.

Interpretations of Findings

Contextual Factors Influencing ECSE Practitioners' Relational Resilience

During the interviews, participants revealed two prominent features that helped to better understand factors that played a role in ECSE practitioners' relational resilience: (1) a strong motivation for working with children and families and (2) a shared experience in feeling stressed enough to have considered a job change. Exploring these factors, while not formally posed as research questions, helped inform the findings by providing insight to the relational context of my participants. More specifically, these factors shed light on the ways that having a passion for teaching and experiencing shared levels of stress with colleagues influenced the relational context of ECSE practitioners.

First, all ten participants described a high motivation for teaching young children when asked about their reasons for entering the field of ECSE. Previous research has found similar findings that suggest teachers enter the field of teaching due to a strong desire to work with children in a variety of ways (Kontos, Hsu, & Dunn, 1994; Stephens & Fish, 2010; Yildiz, 2018). A common phrase used throughout the interviews was that the participants wanted to "make a difference" in the lives of young children and families. Participants specifically expressed that they were excited to work with children who were considered difficult to work with by other teachers and enjoyed helping these students reach their full potential. Other participants expressed that they enjoyed working with students because of the opportunity to play, laugh, and discover new things alongside their students. Participants also noted that working with children who have disabilities was aligned with their values of being an advocate for children with disabilities and their families, making sure children with disabilities were included in the classroom, teaching from a strength-based lens, and advocating for disability awareness. Some of the participants achieved these values by supporting children and families in their own classroom, becoming involved in disability advocacy groups, and celebrating the unique traits that each child brought to their classroom. Further, participants in my

study reported the appealing aspects of working in the field of ECSE and how such aspects served as a buffer when encountering stressful situations at work.

At the same time, the ECSE practitioners that I interviewed reported experiencing high levels of stress. All participants articulated that they experienced a variety of challenges specific to their job that made them feel stressed, fatigued, and frustrated. Participants mentioned that the daily job responsibilities of an ECSE practitioner were emotionally, physically, and mentally exhausting. Burdensome job responsibilities included large amounts of paperwork, overwhelming numbers of children on their caseloads, a sense of isolation from other educators and ECSE professionals, and low pay. Some participants revealed that their responsibilities hindered their ability to dedicate time and energy to teaching and collaborating with colleagues. Other participants mentioned that they considered changing jobs at some point due to the stressful work environments and challenging job responsibilities.

Previous research suggests that many beginning teachers leave the field within the first five years of teaching (Billingsley, 2004; Gray & Taie, 2015). Further, studies suggest that high stress is common for ECSE practitioners and may contribute to the teacher shortage, diminished educational effectiveness, and high turnover (Biglan, Layton, & Jones, 2011). Interestingly, while many participants in my study reported having changed jobs in the past or that they were contemplating doing so in the near future, few of them expressed a desire to leave the field of ECSE entirely. Even though my participants experienced high levels of stress on the job, they remained motivated to teach. Having established a better understanding of the context of ECSE practitioners, I will now turn to an exploration of how my participants' relationships with colleagues helped them to feel empowered and maintain a sense of courage in spite of the challenges that they faced.

Features of Professional Relationships in ECSE Practitioners

The first research question for this study focused on *what features characterize the professional relationships of ECSE practitioners?* I drew from Jordan's model (1992) of relational resilience in conceptualizing my research approach. Specifically, Jordan identifies mutual empathy as a key component of powerful professional relationships. In relationships characterized by mutual empathy, both participants feel understood and supported. In this way, mutual empathy is different from the concept of social support, which connotes a one-way expression of care and understanding. Jordan further argues that relationships characterized by mutual empathy enable the individuals to feel a sense of courage when they face challenges, and to experience a sense of empowerment in terms of resolving those challenges. The ECSE practitioners in my study provided varied and nuanced examples of each of these three constructs, thus supporting the utility of Jordan's framework (1992) for understanding the elements that contribute to the resilience of ECSE practitioners in general.

Results from this study revealed that the construct of mutual empathy was commonly experienced in ECSE practitioners' relationships with their colleagues. More specifically, the elements of mutual empathy that were expressed by participants were experiencing a general sense of caring among colleagues, communicating openly about the job's stressors, receiving helpful advice from colleagues, receiving direct assistance

in teaching tasks, and learning from colleagues. Participants from my study revealed that they benefited from relationships that were mutually growth-fostering. For example, some of my participants shared that they felt that their colleagues created a caring space where they could connect over the common challenges of working in the field of ECSE. These interactions helped my participants feel less alone in their struggles and provided a space to brainstorm about solutions to challenges unique to the field of ECSE. Other participants expressed that they were able to talk openly with their colleagues about difficulties of the job such as large caseloads, dealing with challenging behaviors in children, and engaging in challenging situations with administration. Having a chance to engage in such conversations with colleagues helped my participants feel less alone, exhausted, and stressed. Participants also revealed that they found it helpful to receive helpful advice and assistance when they were having a hard day or situation at work. They described finding it helpful not only to receive support in their teaching but also have an opportunity to support other ECSE professionals. For example, one participant expressed the rewards of sharing resources with other teachers on Google Drive and described her aspiration to have a “model classroom” to benefit other teachers. Overall, the participants expressed mutual empathy through a variety of interactions. They noted experiences that moved beyond the notion of social support and exhibited the construct of mutual empathy by detailing examples of when they felt connected to their colleagues through mutuality.

Participants also experienced courage as a result of the support they received from colleagues with whom they had formed mutually empathetic relationships. A number of participants reported on challenging situations with children, families, or colleagues and described how they had developed new skills for addressing these challenges. They revealed challenging situations at work that had shaken their confidence and described how the support from a colleague helped them overcome the fear evoked by such situations. They found the confidence to deal with a challenging parent, learn a novel teaching task, or overcome a mistake at work. The participants’ development of courage was facilitated by the empathy and engagement they received from their colleagues.

Moreover, the majority of participants reported that they experienced empowerment in relationships with colleagues. They revealed experiencing empowerment when they developed positive capacities such as flexibility or creativity as a result of a growth-fostering relationship. They indicated feeling empowered when they worked in collaboration with colleagues to solve problems and receive emotional support and encouragement.

As I noted in Chapter 2, research on the topic of relational resilience with colleagues in the teaching profession is limited. The majority of research on the subject exists within the field of counseling and applies to the relationship between the therapist and client (e.g., Duffey & Somody, 2011). There are a few studies that focus on relational resilience in teaching (Gu, 2014; Le Cornu, 2009; Le Cornu, 2013). Most studies examining the relational aspects of resilience in the field of education focus more broadly on the role that relationships and social supports (i.e., professional development workshops, mentorship, supportive friends and family) have on teachers’ resilience (Alterman et al., 2007; Drew & Sonowski, 2019; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

According to my review of the literature, two studies touch on the construct of mutuality that is central to Jordan's model of relational resilience (Jordan, 1992; Le Cornu 2009; 2013; 2014). Le Cornu (2013) studied relational resilience in teaching by examining the role of relationships in promoting early career teacher resilience. She designed a qualitative study that investigated the dynamic and complex interplay among individual, relational, and contextual conditions that operate to promote early career teacher resilience. Her results showed that teachers' relationship with their colleagues was significant to promoting relational resilience. The teachers experienced mutual empathy with their colleagues through sharing work, emotional support, and professional support. She also found that empowerment was experienced by teachers who had strong mentor teachers and professional learning opportunities. These teachers reported feeling more confident in taking risks and developing their teaching skills. They reported a similar experience to the participants in my study of keeping each other going through the highs and lows of teaching (Le Cornu, 2013). They further reported receiving professional support by attending conferences, online platforms, and keeping in touch with their former and current colleagues. Le Cornu also found that professional staff including counselors, advisors, and specialist support staff played a role in providing encouragement for the early career teachers and developing their courage. The relationships that early childhood teachers benefited from the most in terms of their development of courage was administrative staff and former advisors from their teacher preparation programs.

My study differed somewhat from that of Le Cornu (2013) in the sense that it focused more intensively on understanding the three constructs of relational resilience with colleagues through interactions that are supportive and empathetic. Findings from my study are largely supportive of Le Cornu's work in terms of participants experiencing mutual empathy and empowerment in their relationships with their colleagues. My study added to this literature by offering a nuanced portrait of these relationship dynamics in the workplace.

Key Factors of Professional Relationships that Promote ECSE Practitioners' Resilience

The second research question for this study was *what are the key factors of professional relationships that seem to promote ECSE practitioners' resilience with respect to their work?*

Collectively, the participants identified a variety of factors that made them feel connected to their colleagues even as they were experiencing stressful conditions at work. The most common reported factors were personal characteristics that led to mutual empathy including positive attitude, strong communication, flexibility, open mindedness, shared values, sense of humor, and responsiveness. Participants revealed that they felt connected to colleagues when they shared professional values related to teaching, including a positive attitude towards challenges and a strength-based perspective towards working with children with disabilities. Participants also felt connected to colleagues that shared an open mind towards different teaching philosophies and styles. Other participants noted that they felt connected to colleagues who shared their personal values such as their personal culture or heritage. Participants also described feeling connected to

colleagues who were flexible in their approach to teaching and conflict. A sense of humor also helped colleagues feel connected and helpful to encountering the stress of teaching. Participants expressed that they felt connected to colleagues who exhibited clear communication and were responsive in their conversations. Friendship outside the workplace was also a shared experience that made participants feel connected to colleagues. All of these factors were reported to help teachers move beyond the stress of teaching, feel energized in their work with children and families, and encouraged teachers to stay at their current position.

In general, previous research indicates that special educators are most resilient when they possess specific psychological characteristics (Cancio et al., 2018; Drew & Sosnowski, 2019; Mansfield et al., 2016; Stephens & Fish, 2010; Yildiz, 2018). The most commonly reported factor contributing to resilience is the ability to use adaptive coping strategies in dealing with stress. Helpful coping strategies included viewing stressors as challenges rather than threats, talking to a supervisor, exercising, and finding support from a colleague (Cancio et al., 2018). While most of the previous research on teachers' resilience focuses on factors that exist outside of the relationships (i.e., intrapersonal protective factors), findings from my research highlighted factors found in relationships between colleagues that promoted relational resilience (Cancio et al., 2018; Drew & Sosnowski, 2019; Stephens & Fish, 2010; Yildiz, 2018). The most commonly reported factors that promoted relational resilience and mutual empathy, whether with a colleague or a friend outside of work, were *shared* personal characteristics (e.g., shared values of teaching and communication).

Key Factors of Professional Relationships that Undermined ECSE Practitioners' Resilience

The third and final research question for this study was *what are the key factors of professional relationships that seem to undermine ECSE practitioners' resilience with respect to their work?* The question was included in an effort to develop a better understanding of what factors hindered ECSE practitioners' ability to cultivate relational resilience. Understanding the factors that undermine relational resilience in ECSE practitioners is helpful to develop more effective supports and practices for ECSE practitioners.

The majority of participants identified personal characteristics of colleagues that made them difficult to work with, such as being inflexible or negative in a collaborative situation. They found it challenging to establish a sense of mutual empathy with these colleagues, and were less able to respond to stressful situations with a feeling of courage and a sense of empowerment.

Participants also explained ways in which external factors hindered their sense of connection with colleagues. The most commonly reported external factors were school-level policies and practices that created a difficult teaching environment. Such external factors included lack of training on how to lead paraprofessionals, inconsistent classroom leadership due to frequent job turnover in ECSE, and difficult scheduling.

Research on the topic of the risk factors of relational resilience in ECSE practitioners and special education teachers is limited. Cappe and colleagues (2017) discovered that special education teachers who received less instructional support in

their schools experienced greater levels of stress. Furthermore, previous research suggests that early childhood educators face numerous challenges to establishing supportive collegial relationships including difficult scheduling and workload (King et al., 2006; Whitaker et al., 2013). These challenges contributed to poor professional and psychological wellbeing in early childhood educators as well as an ability to effectively collaborate with colleagues (Kwon et al., 2021). Research also suggests that ECSE practitioners experienced additional job stress due to the substantial energy needed to provide for children with disabilities and families (Jeon, Diamond, McCartney, & Kwon, 2021). Findings from my study suggest that certain factors including difficult scheduling, frequent job turnover, and demands of the job inhibited ECSE practitioners' ability to feel connected in their relationships with colleagues. My research expands on previous research by focusing more narrowly on the relational experiences of ECSE practitioners and which factors undermine an ECSE practitioners' ability to cultivate relational resilience.

My participants identified lack of training on how to work with paraprofessionals as a factor that inhibited their resilience. This finding supports the results of qualitative study by Appl (2006), which focused on first year ECSE practitioners and the relationships they had with their paraprofessionals. The study found that teachers who lacked training specifically in the area of working with paraprofessionals also were impeded by having different teaching philosophies and views on early childhood education and often felt isolated as they were trying to address these problems. The study found that the first year ECSE practitioners felt overwhelmed by the demands of their role as a supervisor to their paraprofessional. Findings from my study revealed similar results and also suggest that the lack of leadership training contributed to stress and conflict in ECSE practitioners' relationships with paraprofessionals.

The majority of the previous research on factors contributing to or undermining teachers' resilience focuses on the individual factors of teachers outside of the relational dynamic of their colleagues. Findings from my study suggest that personal characteristics and external factors play a role in ECSE practitioners' resilience that are unique to the relationships that they experience with their colleagues.

Limitations of Study

The purpose of my study was to provide an in-depth investigation of teachers' experiences of relationships with their colleagues and to examine whether those relationships furnished a sense of power and courage that enabled them to deal effectively with stressful conditions. Therefore, a qualitative approach to the inquiry was appropriate and allowed a depth of understanding that may not have been achieved through a quantitative method (Creswell & Poth, 2016). However, my study has certain limitations that are important to discuss.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, my interviews were conducted on-line rather than in person. It is possible that the need for technical proficiency may have discouraged some of my participants from agreeing to participate in my study. It is also possible that the teachers may have been less forthcoming in their responses than they would have been if we had been able to talk face-to-face. In particular, it may be more difficult to develop rapport and a sense of trust between interviewer and participant in the absence of

all the small cues that typically occur in the course of ordinary conversations (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Another limitation of this study is that some participants may have been eager to portray their own actions in a positive light rather than to reveal behavior that may have been problematic. This is a common and understandable reaction, and particularly understandable in a field where teachers are often unfairly criticized for circumstances that are beyond their control. I may have captured an even richer and more nuanced picture of my participant's reality if I had been able to conduct additional interviews or engage in informal observations in the classroom.

In general, this research posed challenges to the extent that I was attempting to draw upon constructs that are somewhat loosely defined in the literature (Jordan, 1992). In designing my initial questions around constructs such as "mutual empathy," I may have prompted the participants in a way that was more consistent with Jordan's notion of, for example, "connection." For example, I asked my participants to describe "a colleague whom they felt connected to" in an effort to better understand the construct of mutual empathy. In retrospect, I realize that this question may have elicited responses related to mutual empathy or to a sense of connection. However, these challenges were offset by the unstructured nature of the interview, which allowed me to probe for examples and clarification. Ultimately, I think that I arrived at a clear understanding in most cases of participants' own perceptions about these constructs.

A final limitation is that my experience as an ECSE practitioner and doctoral student may have influenced my participants' responses. During the time of my study, I was a doctoral student in the field of ECSE. Since I was working on my dissertation, I was no longer working in the field of ECSE as an ECSE practitioner. My role as a doctoral student may have limited the level of connectedness that I may have been able to achieve if I was still an ECSE practitioner. My participants may have responded differently and less intimately to me since I was a doctoral student. Throughout this study, I remained alert to how my biases, experiences, and role as a doctoral student may have influenced my research.

Implications for Theory and Research

This study's results offer guidance on further research topics. The professional experiences of ECSE practitioners are often very stressful but this study's results indicate that ECSE practitioners are better able to cope effectively with the challenges of teaching when they experience a sense of mutuality and empathy with their colleagues. There exists little research focused on the topic of mutuality and relational resilience in ECSE practitioners; rather many studies focus on obtaining institutional support or on having opportunities for social interactions (i.e., professional development opportunities, trainings from experienced colleagues, and social interactions with colleagues). In contrast, this study sheds light on the construct of mutuality by examining growth-fostering factors that *both* colleagues bring to a relationship including sharing teaching resources and encouraging each other during hard times. Research on the topic of mutuality rather than social support in the field of ECSE is sparse and needed.

This is an especially timely topic given the COVID-19 pandemic and the effect that it has on ECSE practitioners' stress and wellbeing (Carver-Thomas, Leung, & Burns,

2021). Practitioners have been required to adapt their teaching methods in this challenging new environment. The students themselves have been dealing with stressful situations at home, as their parents have adapted to new working conditions and coped with changes to their childcare arrangements. Additionally, the practitioners themselves have, like everyone else, to deal with practical, financial, and health concerns. While it can only be hoped that we will not be subjected to these particular challenges in the future, researchers could specifically compare the development of mutual empathy in settings that are particularly disadvantageous as well as those which are less problematic.

The final implication for future research is the need to focus on professional-paraprofessional relationships and the specific ways that these relationships either promote or hinder ECSE practitioners' resilience. While I did not conduct a systematic comparison of the relationships that my participants formed with professionals and paraprofessionals, the participants reported experiencing high levels of stress due to the interactions that they have with paraprofessionals. In other words, these relationships contributed to the stress of teaching, and as such certainly did not provide the opportunity for mutual empathy that often characterized relationships among professional colleagues. The most commonly reported problems with paraprofessionals were their inflexible attitudes and resistance to change. Additionally, the paraprofessionals were more likely to hold teaching philosophies that were at odds with those of the participants. Participants revealed that they felt inadequate leading paraprofessionals due to lack of training and preparation. Research focusing on the relationships between ECSE practitioners and paraprofessionals can offer a better understanding of how to support ECSE practitioners in their relationships with paraprofessionals.

Implications for Practice

Findings from this study provide targeted implications for design and delivery of professional development initiatives and personnel preparation programs. This includes the significance of promoting the role of mentor teachers, and structuring classroom instruction around participating in a collaborative team of teachers rather than operating independently as an individual in the classroom.

This study's data revealed that ECSE practitioners benefited from relationships with their colleagues, and especially mentor teachers. Many of the participants in this study revealed that they experienced the three constructs of relational resilience (i.e., mutual empathy, development of courage, and empowerment) with mentor teachers. Some participants also revealed that their mentor teachers helped them to remain at their current job and stay in the field of ECSE. Other studies on teacher resilience have found similar results relating to the role of mentoring on teacher resilience. For example, Luet and Vernon-Dotson (2017) explored the role that mentors played in beginning teachers' resilience and found that mentoring and professional development are commonly reported as factors that enhance early career teacher resilience.

This is an example of what mentoring in early childhood could look like but there remains a need to examine the role of mentoring specifically in the field of ECSE. ECSE practitioners should be assigned mentor teachers and provided a professional relationship that is mutually empathetic and empowering. Engaging in reflective practice with a mentor teacher may be one way to create mutuality in a mentor-teacher relationship. This

is especially important given that teachers in the first five years of teaching are vulnerable to burnout (Perryman & Calvert, 2019). My study revealed that many participants found their first years of teaching to be challenging and stressful. However, many of my study's participants shared that their mentor teachers promoted their resilience and buffered the stress of teaching and even leaving their position. Mentor teachers should provide mutually sustaining relationships by providing reflective practice, arranging ECSE practitioners' visits to other school sites and ECSE practitioners, and providing accessible and interactive teaching resources to beginning teachers.

The second implication for practice is that there should be a cultural shift from individual teaching to collaborative relationships in ECSE. According to the Division of Early Childhood (2014) Recommended Practices, the quality of collaborative relationships and interactions affects the success of services provided to children and families. Sustaining collaborative professional relationships helps to ensure that services achieve desired child and family outcomes.

Findings from this study revealed that many participants felt isolated at their job while encountering high levels of stress. Participants revealed that their job at times feels overwhelming. Further, participants reported that they have little time to interact with their colleagues. ECSE practitioners should be provided with more opportunities to collaborate with fellow ECSE practitioners. ECSE practitioners should be invited to *all* school-wide meetings and asked to *actively* participate by sharing their unique and vital expertise in significant areas such as early child development. ECSE practitioners should be provided with opportunities to visit other ECSE practitioners' classrooms, socially interact with colleagues, and collaborate on teaching tasks. Additionally, since all participants in my study conveyed a strong motivation to work for children and families, ECSE practitioners should be provided with a platform to share their voice within collaborative opportunities on a class-wide and school-wide level.

Another implication for practice from this study is that there needs to be more support in ECSE practitioners' ability to cope with the stress and demands of teaching in ECSE. The majority of participants noted that their daily tasks and responsibilities were often emotionally, physically, and mentally exhausting. Participants in my study reported challenges including lack of training on how to lead paraprofessionals, a sense of isolation, inconsistent classroom leadership due to frequent job turnover in ECSE, and difficult scheduling. Findings from this study shed light on the extent of stress experienced by ECSE practitioners and suggest that there needs to be more professional development opportunities on ways to cope with the stress of teaching in ECSE.

In addition to the difficulty of the work itself, many participants revealed that frequent job turnover is a common phenomenon in the field of ECSE. One way to address the high level of job turnover is to provide ECSE practitioners with opportunities for getting promoted or moving to higher positions later in their professional career. Although this is an available option for most ECSE practitioners, there should be more awareness and understanding that this is a common desire and need for many who work in the field of ECSE. There can be more structure and awareness to promotion opportunities, training, and positions available that serve children and families in other capacities. Another option is to create a transition plan for teachers when they leave their roles.

Other studies addressing the teacher shortage have found significant levels of stress in the field of ECSE. For example, according to research, special education teachers face many challenges including large caseloads, overwhelming workload and compliance obligations, lack of administrative support, excessive paperwork, feelings of isolation, compensation that is too low to mitigate the high costs of living and student debt, and minimal opportunities for collaboration with colleagues (Albrecht et al., 2009, Carlson, Brauen, Klein, Schroll, Willing, 2002; Ondrasek, Carver-Thomas, Scott, Darling-Hammond, 2020). Findings from this study confirm these results and suggest that the stress and frequent job turnover in the field of ECSE need to be addressed through more research on understanding the experiences of ECSE practitioners as well as developing more supportive practices and policies.

Conclusion

Innovative solutions for the teacher shortage are timely and needed. Findings from this study suggest that promoting ECSE practitioners' relational resilience is an important way to address the teacher shortage and improve workplace conditions of ECSE practitioners. The field of ECSE is highly relational and findings from this study suggest that a mutually supportive relationship with a colleague is one factor that contributes to resilience. Cultivating relational resilience in ECSE practitioners is an important contribution to supporting teachers as being satisfied and thriving professionals while encountering high levels of stress. This study provides insight into the relational experiences of ECSE practitioners, how to support ECSE practitioners and, consequently, provide children and families with the quality care that they need.

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Appendix A: Codebook and Coding

Research questions:

- What features characterize the professional relationships of ECSE practitioners?
- What are the key factors of professional relationships that seem to promote their resilience with respect to their work?
- What are the key risk factors of professional relationships that seem to undermine their resilience with respect to their work?

Components of relational resilience theory:

- Mutual empathy (both people contribute to the growth of each other and the relationship)
- Empowerment (connections that enable participants to experience energy, creativity, and flexibility)
- Development of courage (capacity to move into situations when an individual feels fear or hesitation)

Definition of relational resilience: resilience that is promoted by the capacity for connection and mutually empathetic, responsive relationships (Jordan, 2003).

Code Number and Name	Excerpts That Refer To...	Reference frequency	Participant frequency (out of 10)
1. Burn out	...the phenomenon of professionals experiencing emotional, mental, and/or compassion fatigue	33	10
2. Entering ECSE - Avoiding bureaucracy	...respondents referring to getting into the field in an effort to avoid bureaucracy in their previous career	1	1
3. Entering ECSE - Collaboration	...respondents referring to getting into the field because of the enjoyment of collaboration between colleagues	1	1
4. Entering ECSE - Opportunities	...respondents referring to getting into the field because of teacher training opportunities	1	1
5. Entering ECSE - Passion for kids	...respondents referring to getting into the field because of a passion and joy of working with young children (i.e., birth to age five) with disabilities	15	9
6. Entering ECSE - Personal	...respondents referring to getting into the field because of personal connections of having a sibling	2	2

	connections	with a disability and knowing someone already in the field		
7.	Job Turnover	...respondents referring to the phenomenon of job turnover in the field of ECSE	21	8
8.	Protective factor – (deleted and renamed – protective factors – personal characteristics and created as an umbrella code)	...respondents referring to personal characteristics that make a respondent feel connected to colleagues	53	9
9.	Protective factor - development of courage	...respondents referring to the phenomenon of development of courage which is defined as the capacity to move into situations when an individual feels fear or hesitation	16	9
10.	Protective factor - empathy	... respondents referring to the mutual empathy phenomenon of relational resilience which is defined as when both people contribute to the growth of each other and the relationship	22	10
11.	Protective factor - empowerment	...respondents referring to the empowerment phenomenon of relational resilience which is defined as connections that enable participants to experience energy, creativity, and flexibility	28	9
12.	Protective factor - Renamed protective factor – external reinforcement and support	...respondents referring to feeling connected to colleagues when their wellness is prioritized at their job placement	113	10
13.	Risk factor - (renamed risk factor – personal	...respondents referring to feeling disconnected with their colleagues when there is a lack of follow through	38	9

	characteristics and made an umbrella term)		
14. Risk factor – (renamed risk factor – external factors)	...respondents referring to feeling disconnected with their colleagues when they do not feel valued by their colleagues	34	9
15. COVID - Burn out	...the phenomenon of professionals experiencing emotional, mental, and/or compassion fatigue during the COVID-19 pandemic	28	8
16. COVID - Connected	...respondents referring to feeling connected to their colleagues during the COVID-19 pandemic	46	9
17. COVID - Disconnected	...respondents referring to feeling disconnected to their colleagues during the COVID-19 pandemic	14	7
18. COVID - More rewarding	...respondents expressing that they find their job more rewarding during the COVID-19 pandemic	3	3
19. COVID - Needs	...respondents expressing a general need in relation to their job during the COVID-19 pandemic	4	3
20. COVID - Needs - Peer/colleague support	...respondents expressing the need for social connection during the COVID-19 pandemic	9	2
21. COVID - Needs –Admin Support	...respondents expressing the need for more support during the COVID-19 pandemic	24	9
22. COVID - Protective Factor - Tech Savvy	...respondents expressing their skill in technology serves as protective factor during the COVID-19 pandemic	1	1
23. COVID - Risk - Being a burden	...respondents expressing that in terms of connecting with their colleagues, they feel as though they are a burden during the COVID-19 pandemic	2	2

Appendix B: Demographics and Resilience Questionnaire

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this important questionnaire for my study. I am really interested in hearing about your experiences at work. This survey should take about 10-15 minutes to complete. At the end of the questionnaire, there is a place where you can let me know if you'd like to participate in two interviews so that I can talk to you more about your experiences. Please be sure to indicate your interest if you'd like to participate. Be assured that all answers you provide will be kept confidential. Please click 'NEXT' to begin.

Demographics and Resilience Questionnaire

1. What is your current job title (e.g., special education teacher)?

2. How long have you been working in the field of early childhood special education? _____ years
3. How long ago did you receive your early childhood special educational credential? _____ years ago
4. How many children (including those with or without disabilities) do you work with in a typical day? _____ child/children
5. How many children diagnosed with one or more disabilities/developmental delays do you work with throughout a typical day? _____ child/children
6. Which racial/ethnic categories best describe you? Check all that apply.
 - ☐ American Indian or Alaskan Native
 - ☐ Asian/Pacific Islander
 - ☐ Black or African American
 - ☐ Hispanic American/Latinx
 - ☐ White/Caucasian (other than Latino)
 - ☐ Other (please specify) _____
 - ☐ Decline to state
7. What is your gender?
 - ☐ Female
 - ☐ Male
 - ☐ Other
 - ☐ Decline to state
8. What is your age?
 - ☐ 18-25
 - ☐ 25-35
 - ☐ 35-45
 - ☐ 45-55
 - ☐ 55-65
 - ☐ 65 or older
 - ☐ Decline to state
9. Do you intend to stay in the field of early childhood special education?
 - ☐ Yes

- No
 - Undecided/decline to state
- 10. How many years do you intend to stay at your current place of employment?
_____ years
- 11. In general, how connected do you feel to your colleagues at work?
 - Extremely connected
 - Somewhat connected
 - Neutral
 - Somewhat disconnected
 - Very disconnected
- 12. Please think of one work colleague you feel close to. Describe the traits that make you feel connected to that person and what you do with that person that makes you feel connected. (Imagine you are describing that person to a friend, what would you say about that person and your experiences with them?)
- 13. Please think of one colleague who you do **not** feel close to. Describe the traits that make you feel disconnected to that person and what experiences have made you feel disconnected. (Imagine you are describing that person to a friend, what would you say about that person and your experiences with them?)
- 14. Please tell me your reasons for entering the field of early childhood special education.

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

My name is Kimberly Knodel. I am a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley and SFSU.

The purpose of my research study is to explore the experiences of early childhood special education practitioners' experiences with relational resilience in the field of early childhood special education. The proposed study aims to add to the research base of understanding the ways that early childhood special education practitioners experience relationships with their colleagues.

During this interview, you will be asked questions about your relationships with your colleagues. I am interested in your experiences as an early childhood special education practitioner. Some questions may not apply to you so just let me know that. There are no right or wrong answers, so please be as honest as you can be in helping me understand your experiences. When you are answering the question, please don't name the person, please make up a name or use initials so that I can make sure to keep information anonymous. Please also let me know if you'd like me to stop the interview at anytime. I will be recording the interview on a tape recorder and identifiable information such as names and audio recordings will remain as confidential as possible. Your answers will only be used for my research about relational resilience in early childhood special education.

When answering these interview questions, please do *not* identify others by name. Please make up a pseudonym when responding to questions about your colleagues.

General

Relational resilience is defined as resilience that is promoted by the capacity for connection and mutually empathetic, responsive relationships (Jordan, 2003).

1. Please tell me your reasons for choosing to work in the field of early childhood special education.

2. Can you start by telling me about your current teaching placement?

Probes if needed:

1. Who else do you work with on a daily basis? (e.g., aides, co-teachers, supervisors)
2. What are the student grade levels?
3. What kinds of disabilities do your children have?
4. What is the racial/ethnic background of your children? Can you tell me a little about their family backgrounds in general, such as parents' education, where they are from?

Mutual empathy (both people contribute to the growth of each other and the relationship)

1. I would like to learn a little bit about the relationships you have with the colleagues you work with at your current setting. In general, what do you find most rewarding about working with your colleagues? When answering this question, please do *not* identify others by name. Please make up a pseudonym when responding to this question.

Probe: Why do you find each thing rewarding?

2. Please think of a colleague who helps you grow or improve as a person or as a professional. Can you tell me a little about that person and what it is about him/her that is helpful to you? When answering this question, please do *not* identify others by name. Please make up a pseudonym when responding to this question.

Probe: In what ways do you feel that you also help that colleague to grow? What makes it hard or challenging to help your colleague? What makes it easy?

3. OK, now think of a colleague whom you just feel connected to. What is it about this person that makes you feel that you can connect with him/her? How connected does this colleague feel connected to you, do you think? When answering this question, please do *not* identify others by name. Please make up a pseudonym when responding to this question.

OK, what do you find most challenging? Why?

4. Please think of one colleague who you do *not* feel close to. Describe the ways in which you do not feel connected to that person. When answering this question, please do *not* identify others by name. Please make up a pseudonym when responding to this question.

Empowerment (connections that enable participants to experience energy, creativity, and flexibility)

1. In most jobs there are times that call for a creative or flexible approach to do something new or resolve a problem. Maybe a time when you didn't have exactly the materials you needed to do something in the classroom, and had to invent a way around the situation. Or maybe a time when the ways you had been approaching a situation just weren't working and you needed to try something new and different. Can you think of a time when something like that happened to you at work? Tell me about it. When answering this question, please do *not* identify others by name. Please make up a pseudonym when responding to this question.
2. How much do your colleagues help you to be more creative in situations like these? Can you give me an example? When answering this question, please do *not* identify others by name. Please make up a pseudonym when responding to this question.

3. Being a teacher can be very rewarding at times but also very tiring and even discouraging at times. Can you tell me about a time when you felt particularly energized to do something at work? When answering this question, please do *not* identify others by name. Please make up a pseudonym when responding to this question.
4. How much do any of your colleagues energize you in situations like these? Can you give me an example? When answering this question, please do *not* identify others by name. Please make up a pseudonym when responding to this question.

Development of Courage (capacity to move into situations when an individual feels fear or hesitation)

1. Can you tell me about a time when you felt fear or hesitation while working as a teacher? Please describe what happened. When answering this question, please do *not* identify others by name. Please make up a pseudonym when responding to this question.
2. How much do any of your colleagues help you feel more courageous or less worried in the situation? Can you give me an example? When answering this question, please do *not* identify others by name. Please make up a pseudonym when responding to this question.

Resilience and Conclusion

1. Most people tend to think from time to time about changing jobs, or even moving to a different field. I am interested in understanding your experiences with this. Can you tell me about a time when you may have been discouraged and a colleague did something that helped you stay in the field of early childhood special education? When answering this question, please do *not* identify others by name. Please make up a pseudonym when responding to this question.
2. What about the opposite situation? Can you describe a time when a colleague caused you to feel stressed or want to leave the field of early childhood special education? When answering this question, please do *not* identify others by name. Please make up a pseudonym when responding to this question.
3. We are almost ready to wrap up, but I wanted to ask you a general question. In your opinion, what are some reasons that come to mind to explain why people either leave the field or change jobs often in early childhood special education?
 3. In general, what are the most important aspects of relationships with colleagues that help teachers remain in this field?
 4. COVID and distant learning questions –

- a. Have you felt more or less connected to your colleagues during distant learning?
 - b. What has been the most challenging aspect of distant learning in terms of connecting with colleagues?
 - c. What has been the most rewarding aspect of distant learning in terms of connecting to colleagues?
 - d. What do you think would be helpful in connecting with your colleagues during distant learning?
 - e. What are your needs?
 - f. Has the field of early childhood special education become more or less rewarding since COVID?
5. I've really enjoyed our conversation and have learned so much from talking with you. Is there anything else you'd like to add to help me understand your experiences with colleagues at work? When answering this question, please do *not* identify others by name. Please make up a pseudonym when responding to this question.