

Novice Special Education Teacher Identity Development

by

Sarah Slegal

Bachelor of Science in Education, Clarion University of Pennsylvania, 2003

Masters of Arts in Education, Baldwin-Wallace College, 2007

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
School of Education in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

University of Pittsburgh

2023

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

This dissertation was presented

by

Sarah Slegal

It was defended on

May 10, 2023

and approved by

Committee Member: Dr. Anna Arlotta-Guerrero, Associate Professor and CASE Teacher
Certificate Program Coordinator, Department of Health and Human Development and
Department of Teaching, Leading, and Learning

Committee Member: Dr. Cristin Leahy, Associate Professor and Department Chair, Department
of Special Education at Pennsylvania West University – Clarion Campus

Dissertation Director: Dr. Amy Srsic, Clinical Assistant Professor, Department of Teaching,
Learning, and Leading

Copyright © by Sarah Slegal

2023

Novice Special Education Teacher Identity Development

Sarah Slegal, Ed.D.

University of Pittsburgh, 2023

Abstract

The shortage of qualified special educators within the workforce historically has been limited since the need arose over 50 years ago. Adding additional factors such as an increase in the population being identified with a disability as well as fewer individuals pursuing a degree within special education, has significantly increased the shortage and need within schools today. To complicate matters further, the special education shortage is also impacted by the number of special educators leaving the field; specifically, within the first five to ten years of beginning their careers. Gersten et al. (2001) points out that the job design for special educators is complex and often educators are underprepared for the work demands they encounter.

This study focuses on the teacher preparation program design with a specific lens on opportunities within the student teaching experience for identity development. Using qualitative methods and measures, this study looks to see if increasing the exposure to different special education environments and teaching strategies (life skills, behavior, learning support, etc.) increases the impact of teacher candidate's identity development in the inductive years.

Table of Contents

Preface.....	ix
1.0 Naming and Framing the Problem of Practice	1
1.1 Broader Problem Statement	1
1.2 User Description	6
1.1.1 Subjects	7
1.1.2 Players	7
1.1.3 Crowd	8
1.1.4 Context Setters	8
1.1.5 Organizational System Description	8
1.3 Organizational relationships	10
1.4 Fishbone Analysis	13
2.0 Theory of Improvement and Implementation Plan.....	15
2.1 Driver Diagram.....	17
2.2 Systems Measures	20
2.2.1 Intervention	20
2.2.2 Study Sample/Population	21
2.2.3 Methods.....	22
2.3 The Project Plan	23
2.3.1 PDSA Cycle Description	23
2.3.2 Data Gathering and Analysis Description	25
2.4 Conclusion	26

3.0 PDSA Resulta	27
3.1 Survey Results.....	27
3.2 PDSA Cycle 1 (February – March).....	30
3.2.1 PDSA Cycle 1 Reflection	35
3.3 PDSA Cycle 2 (March-April)	35
3.4 Prediction v. Outcome.....	40
4.0 Learning and Action.....	42
4.1 Key Findings	42
4.2 Strengths.....	45
4.3 Weaknesses.....	45
4.4 Limitations	46
4.5 Next Steps and Implications	47
5.0 Reflections.....	50
Appendix.....	52
Appendix Item 1: Observation Form	52
Appendix Item 2 – Additional Journal Prompts within Student Teaching (Ask in Weeks Three-Seven)	54
Appendix Item 3 – Focus Group Protocol.....	55
Appendix Item 4 - Survey/Questionnaire Protocol and Instrument.....	57
Appendix Item 5 PDSA Timeline	59
Bibliography	60

List of Tables

Table 1 - Teacher Preparation Survey	28
Table 2 - Focus Group PDSA 1 Interview Coding.....	32
Table 3 - Focus Group PDSA 2 Interview Coding.....	37

List of Figures

Figure 1 - Organizational Systems	10
Figure 2 - Systems of Change.....	11
Figure 3 - Fishbone Diagram	14
Figure 4 - Driver Diagram	17

Preface

I am beyond grateful to have walked this educational journey with my advisor, Dr. Amy Srsic, who provided valuable feedback, support, and motivation. Furthermore, I could not have completed this without my other two committee members, Dr. Anna Arlotta-Guerrero and Dr. Cristin Leahy, who generously provided their expertise and perspective to push my thinking further.

I am grateful for my education cohort and special education arco, both of whom provided me with guidance when projects seemed tough or a second eye on my work to keep me moving in a straight path.

Closest to my heart is my appreciation of my family. My husband, Calvin, whose continuous support pushed me to keep going and helping me when work and family needs arose. To my two children, Anthony and Natalie, who supported me with extra hugs and words of encouragement. Finally, to my mom, Myra, and dad, Gary, who have always walked along on my educational paths with me since I began them in 1999. Combined, my family support is the root of my success and I thank you.

To have accomplished this Educational Doctorate is surreal and I am humble and indebted, knowing that the ones around me are the reason for my success.

1.0 Naming and Framing the Problem of Practice

Novice special education teacher attrition rates have been a chronic issue nationwide since the conception of the special education teacher in 1975 with PL-142 (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA]) (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). As such, special educator attrition creates a significant problem for the discipline in maintaining educator employment beyond five years. This aspect is part of a broader issue within special education whereby novice teachers are leaving the field, creating high demand in public and private schools for highly qualified instructors nationwide.

1.1 Broader Problem Statement

Research suggests that special education teachers leave the profession for five main reasons: incomplete teacher preparedness, inadequate mentorship, excessive work demands, limited professional development, and limited personal support (Tyler & Brunner, 2014; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). In a study of the role of student teaching experiences on the likelihood of staying within their first teaching position, Billingsley and Bettini (2019) point to the important role that teacher preparedness and mentorship play within special education teacher retention. Sciuschetti et al. (2018) points out the daily paperwork demands that special education teachers in particular are required to complete, including accommodating and modifying lesson activities, individual education plans (IEPs), data collection, frequent reports to parents, etc. Farrell (2012) expands that a teacher, in general, struggles with adjusting to employment and experience a reality shock once employed due to challenges with lesson planning, lesson delivery, classroom management, and identity development. In view of the fact

that special education teachers are critical to a growing group of identified students needing special education services, coupled with decreasing rates of special education teacher retention, it is important to strengthen approaches to the preparation and support of preservice and early career special education teachers.

Evaluation Requirements

Evaluation requirements specifically geared toward special education candidates should utilize an evidence-based strategy to effectively distribute meaningful preservice teacher feedback within field experience. To a greater extent, the word *quality* within a high-quality teacher is not clearly defined by the United States Department of Education, which is problematic as *quality* is currently measured conceptually through the lens of student achievement (Cornelius & Nagro, 2014; McCall et al., 2014). Many students with disabilities consistently under perform on standardized testing whereby methods for appropriately interpreting accommodated test scores are limited. As far as evaluation and feedback, effective strategies should focus on immediacy, specificity, constructiveness, and purposefulness (Cornelius & Nagro, 2014). Cornelius and Nagro (2014) continue onward stating these four strategies work together to enhance performance feedback for the teacher candidate which effects positive changes in desired teacher behaviors; especially when done in fidelity. Employing these strategies will guide preservice special education teachers; individually targeting and improving teacher-specific behaviors in need of improvement.

Teacher Preparedness

Teacher preparedness is a contributing factor on whether a novice special educator remains within their position or not (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; McCall et al., 2014; Bouck,

2005; & Butler & Monda-Amaya, 2016). Perspectives encompass the importance of high-quality evaluation in student teaching which include: identity development, instruction of behavioral strategies, experiences to mitigate work demands and stress, and mentorship/induction.

Regarding identity development, preservice candidates need to develop an understanding of their place within special education, in addition to being able to identify all the factors that contribute to how people see themselves: their strengths, challenges, innate abilities (gifts) and capacities to learn. Authors within the literature indicate that preservice candidates whose field experiences occur within self-contained classrooms experience a sense of ownership and opportunity to build one's identity better than those in co-teaching experiences (Roegman et al., 2018). One method of support within co-taught experiences is from university mentors who can help preservice teachers recognize and navigate the unique situations that arise within any classroom. Dukes et al. (2014) found that preservice candidates are not always afforded valuable and meaningful field placements which hinder professional and personal identity growth prior to graduation. In combination with securing varied field placements, impacted in rural areas with limited class options or limited cooperating teacher mentor pool, studies found that special education preservice programs failed to keep pace with the changing roles and functions of special education teachers and were not leading the movement, hindering identity development prior to employment (Bouck, 2005; Dukes et al., 2014).

Secondly, as field experience by itself is challenging for any preservice candidate, Butler and Monda-Amaya (2016) point out that challenging behaviors without proper teacher preparedness led to teacher burnout or an exit of the profession altogether. Butler and Monda-

Amaya (2016) stress that inadequate preparation leaves preservice teachers at a disadvantage in obtaining a repertoire of strategies that can be utilized in handling difficult situations. When strategies are used, research shows that novice teachers tend to use insufficient strategies or altogether fail to implement appropriate strategies effectively; further escalating behaviors past a level of controllability. Butler and Monda-Amaya (2016) recommend that teacher preparation programs contain a strong foundation in behavioral principles and a clear understanding of Positive Behavior Support (PBS) and Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) to properly implement it within the classroom successfully. PBS and ABA, however, are not enough by themselves for effective behavior management. Preservice candidates need to understand their own triggers and skills in de-escalation practices and pair that knowledge with effective strategies that work well with their individual style of teaching. One way to accomplish this is to immerse candidates in realistic situations with challenging behaviors instead of teaching a basic set of behavior management strategies to use in the future.

Finally, the cooperating teachers are preservice teachers' first mentors within the field and are often underutilized within a teacher preparation program. Roberts et al. (2013) mention that cooperating teachers could influence preservice special education teachers to better prepare them for employment and retention within the practice; supporting candidates' emotional development (feeling like a teacher), effective practice (acting like a teacher), and instructional decision making (thinking like a teacher). One recommendation to increase effectiveness of cooperating teachers is having university supervisors provide a set framework of expectations and tips of experiences to pass on to student teachers by cooperating teachers; covering four basic areas: prior to entry, once student teachers start, throughout the experience, and end of

experience, addressing how to *feel*, *act*, and *think* like teachers (Roberts et al., 2019). Proper cooperating teacher training when taking on a preservice special education student teacher as well as building a supporting relationship between university supervisor, student teacher, and cooperating teacher is instrumental.

Work Demands & Support

Teaching students within a general education classroom can create stress and work demands that challenge any novice teacher; these same stresses are further compounded as a special educator since job responsibilities are expansive. Sciuschetti et al. (2018) recommends opportunities during teacher preparation for candidates to observe different classroom experiences like: preschool programs, inclusion classrooms, classrooms servicing students with moderate, severe and profound disabilities, programs for students with emotional/behavioral disorders, settings servicing students with autism and/or intellectual disabilities, and classrooms serving students with sensory disabilities. The authors note that the more immersed a preservice candidate is within the special education profession, one that is dynamic and complex, the better prepared they will be navigating challenges in the field. Sciuschette et al. found that candidates were more versed in the overall responsibilities of a special educator's role, i.e., collaboration, responsibilities, work demands and expectations, if they observed or experienced a variety of special education settings. Farrell (2012) suggests addressing the issue of varied experiences through a supplementary class on *Teaching in the First Year* which would include case studies and experiences from past student teachers during their first year(s) employed. Reflective activities have been shown in research to enhance classroom observations, journal writing, and class discussions through paired case studies analysis.

Mentorship

While teacher preparation is important for transition from university-to-employment, mentorship/induction support is equally crucial as a factor to maintaining novice teachers within the field. Charner-Laird et al. (2016) indicates the desirability of support, guidance, and learning opportunities from novice teachers during the first few years of employment. Support for new teachers however, addresses survival needs as opposed to their growing needs at their place of practice. Congruently, state mentorship/induction systems are inconsistent with a need for better coordination and collaboration across traditional organizational boundaries (DeAngelis et al., 2013). Teacher candidates need support in any state they find employment, so combining both novice-teacher support with clear state-to-state induction programs will provide a supported transition into employment.

Overall, research topics discussed in this paper all touch on a common concept; if preservice candidates have poor experiences, inadequate cooperating teacher support, or lack of development of their identity before bridging to employment, then the retention rate of remaining with the profession decreases tremendously, especially within the first five years of employment. However, a well-rounded meaningful teacher preparation program that focuses on all aspects will be beneficial toward any future special education candidate.

1.2 User Description

Users within the systems, specifically within my place of practice, encompass those within the University itself: professors, dean, provost, etc., and the surrounding community members that supports and collaborates with the University.

1.1.1 Subjects

Students who attend the university have significant interest but little power with how each program is developed and what courses are offered each semester. Students do have power in the area of college/university choice in this regard; however, once they have committed to one school, they have little control over the effectiveness of their given program; especially if that program changes during their tenure. As of July 2022, Clarion University became Pennsylvania Western (PennWest) University, merging with two other western Pennsylvania universities, California and Edinboro University, which will diversify the student population and the professors they engage within class. Students will have a choice of taking courses on their main campus or through multi-modal online options (synchronous via Zoom or asynchronous) for the same class at one of the other two integrated universities.

Faculty can be considered subjects as well as they are in positions at the lowest level within the higher-education system. Especially with the integration, faculty have been involved in different academic and structural groups created to merge three universities programs into one.

1.1.2 Players

The players within my system involve the Provost, the Dean of Education, Field Services and the university President; which are the same players that oversee all three integrated universities. Each present player is involved in the teacher preparation program; specifically with compliance to the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) standards, which provides state recognition of our education programs. The ultimate goal is education program cohesion with the integrated universities.

1.1.3 Crowd

Local school principals and field experience cooperating teachers have little interest and little power since both have minimal influence on the curriculum and structure within teacher preparation programs in higher education. The consensus heard from previous conversations with both the Dean of Education and Director of Field Services, indicated that schools in general are short staffed and often staff need to take on additional teaching responsibilities within the school building to compensate; leaving less time to monitor and guide student teachers. One professor noted in an interview that they wished there was more varied experiences to choose from (city versus suburban versus rural) which would also broaden the exposure to the different levels of special education within each as well.

1.1.4 Context Setters

The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) and the Board of Governors both yield substantial power but have little interest with regards to my problem of practice – specifically both focus on the overall functioning of the education process and university business. Both entities strive to affirm each university within Pennsylvania provides solid and effective education and do so through accreditation. Within PennWest Clarion we justify this affirmation through Anthology, an online system that houses student clearances and data gathered from assignments related to standards set by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP).

1.1.5 Organizational System Description

Organizational systems begin with a vision; a statement of where a university stands with their ideals and program goals. Within my place of practice, our mission statement as of 2021 states the following, “Clarion University provides transformative, lifelong learning opportunities through innovative, nationally recognized programs delivered in inclusive, student-centered environments” (Clarion University). Opened in 1867, Clarion sits in a rural town in western Pennsylvania, near the Allegheny National Forest. Surrounding large-business establishments have left the area in recent years with the progressive expansion of online shopping and businesses sending work oversea due to expense. Being remote offers issues with expansive medical care, and there are limited areas easily accessible to find different products and supplies nearby. Typically, the majority of families that live in the area are low-middle to low-income families that depend on the university to bring extra business from other areas into the town. The university has always maintained close relationships with the town to build working partnerships, especially when it comes time for students to explore field work opportunities within the surrounding schools.

Education faculty themselves, among the three integrated universities, are majority white and serve students that are majority similar. Demographics between all three universities are defined as a rural community; each university located 60-90 miles away from Pittsburgh, PA.

Within my place of practice, our teacher preparatory program offers a four-year undergraduate program that includes a four-week, pre-student teaching field experience as well as a 12-week student teaching placement prior to achieving their degree. During the 12-week special education student teaching placement in particular, candidates experience six-weeks in a low-incidence and six-weeks within a high-incidence field placement. Candidates are exposed to

both elementary and middle or high school students ranging in disabilities based upon the placement selection. Further, candidates are exposed to daily teaching responsibilities in conjunction with practicing their effectiveness in teaching within different styles such as direct instruction v. curriculum-based measurement (CBM) and within atmospheres like pull-out v. push-in. Upon entering our program, candidates can choose to enroll as a major or minor in special education or complete a dual program; in which case their special education experience would include one six-week experience in student teaching.

One difficulty with this placement system resides in the variety within special education that the teacher candidate experiences or a lack thereof. As an example, within my experiences supervising over eight years, some of my teacher candidates have only been exposed to one-or-two disability categories of special education students. Due to limited cooperating teachers and schools that participate within the area, there is a high likelihood of having a pre-student teaching field experience and student teaching placement within a learning disability classroom with the only difference coming from the environment of a different school. This in turn limits the candidate's exposure to the different sectors within special education within special education and further limit's identity development.

1.3 Organizational relationships

Within my place of practice, the organizational system is top-down in nature: Board of Governors, President of University, Provost, Dean of College, Chair of Department, Faculty, and Students.



Figure 1 - Organizational Systems

Within this system, there are a mixture of parties that are for and against change with regards to enhancing the teacher preparation program, seen in Figure 2.

Forces FOR change		Forces AGAINST change	
Director of the Office of Field Service looking for change	Effective teacher preparation program	Integration – sister universities w/other intentions or ideas	
Ed Dean w/in place of practice oversees integrated university		Cooperating Teachers	
Supportive co-workers		Board of Governors – Funding	
President of Penn West University		Local Community	

Figure 2 - Systems of Change

Within PennWest, specifically at Clarion, and the individuals that encompass each party mentioned above, the majority involved are female and have resided within the surrounding rural community throughout their employment. Interviews with professors, the Director of the Office of Field Services, and a Dean of Education yielded unanimous responses about the need for a broader range of experiences for students, which is limited due to the rural area and the amount of school choices and placements available. PennWest’s President has mentioned through integration that a potential exists for new opportunities since the new entity will have access to different areas within Western Pennsylvania along with more staff. The Dean of college, Chair of department, Director of the Office of Field Services, and special education faculty are all supportive of any change needed for teacher preparation. All individuals mentioned have stated in interviews that they wish to see students grow, and currently the faculty feels limited due to location within a rural area that limits resources to field placements and experiences for students.

In an interview with the Chair of Special Education, the rural demographics were mentioned as a hurdle for student teachers as they are not exposed to diverse populations aside from the existing socioeconomic differences. She went on to include that integration offers potential in this area since we would have opportunities to send students to the city and suburbs, expanding exposure to diversity as well as a wider range of students with disabilities.

Cooperating teachers may oppose change within the teacher preparation program because they may or may not be willing to change their own mentoring and teaching styles to accommodate a new direction. In one interview, it was mentioned that some cooperating teachers who are not *ideal* teachers need to be used for field experiences because of the limited availability of choices for quality mentors in special education. Not ideal is defined as not using evidence-based instruction, poor behavior management, poor communication, etc., thereby, impacting identity and professional growth of student teachers.

The Board of Governors have mentioned in previous sessions that funding is stretched thin; thus, leading our three colleges to integrate as a measure of preservation. For any change to teacher preparation to be approved, it will need to be inexpensive or at no cost with no additional staffing measures needed.

The community is the last piece that has been an advocate for no change. More so in regard to the overall integration, the community is wary of losing students at the local college since the community depends on the influx of students to drive their economy during the school year. Our student teachers also support the local schools and if we send them elsewhere, with the support of the other two sister colleges, it may decrease that support the local schools have come to rely on.

1.4 Fishbone Analysis

Utilizing information gathered from peer groups, professor comments, user descriptions, and empathy interviews, I feel at this time that my fishbone supports a solid structure that captures the essence of my problem of practice at this time. Empathy interviews supported the research I conducted this past summer regarding special education teacher attrition within the first five years of employment and further expanded my thoughts regarding school systems as a contributing factor, i.e., general education and special education collaboration.

Interestingly enough, while each fishbone spoke contributes to the main problem, each spoke also at times impacts the others respectively. This then creates various cycles within the fishbone that I will need to consider moving forward. For example, if within the teacher preparation spoke, a breakdown of education or preparation occurs, new special educators will struggle with daily work demands and sustainability which research indicates as a cause of burnout with the most prepared educator. Support and mentorship will also impact work demands in a similar fashion as well as the potential or lack thereof a relationship between university and employment agencies (schools) for support and mentorship. In retrospect, I am appreciative of this knowledge moving forward as it has unraveled a blind spot previously unseen.

Moving forward, I am encouraged with my university's integration in the respect that curriculum and clinical field work is being reconstructed; leaving the leverage needed to enact change at this point in time. I am further encouraged to see what the other universities do within their programs that might lend another perspective toward my problem of practice.

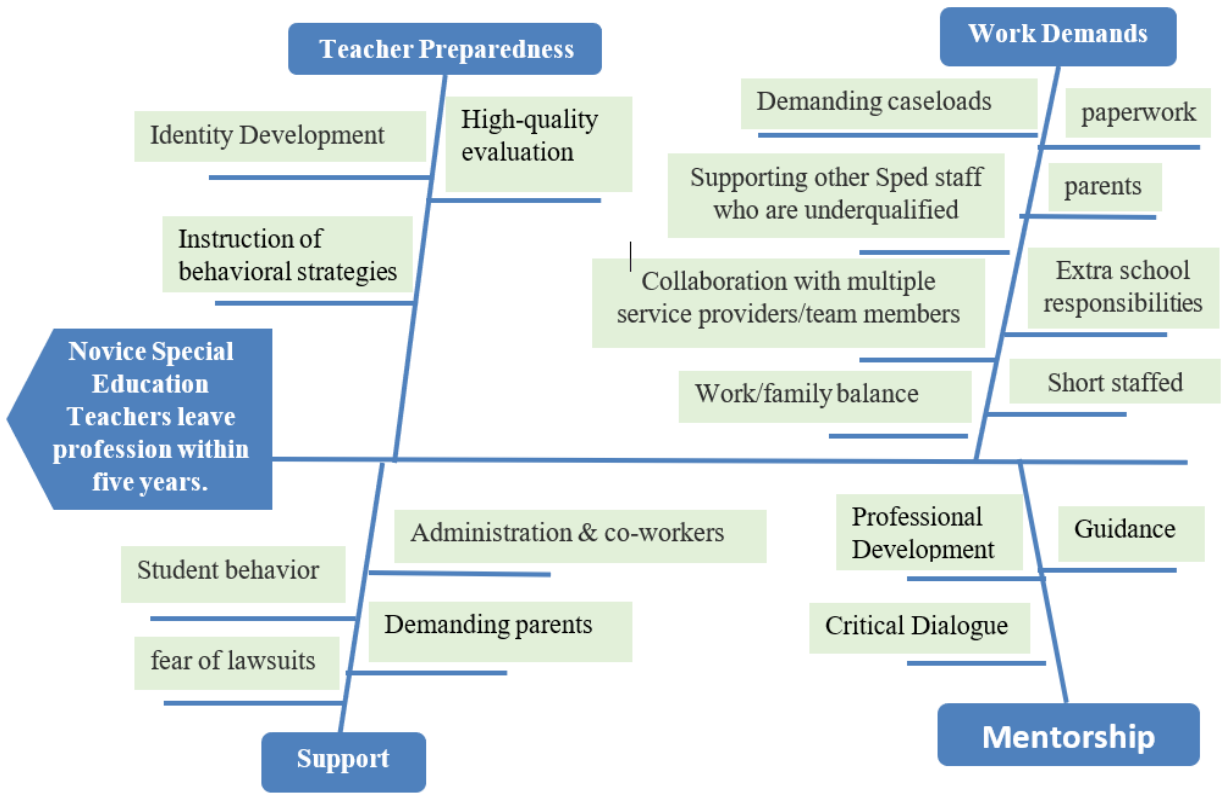


Figure 3 - Fishbone Diagram

2.0 Theory of Improvement and Implementation Plan

Special education teacher attrition rates continue to increase within 2022 as a concerning issue within school systems. According to Monnin et al. (2021) special education teacher attrition is increasing at a rate that is parallel to that of the national population of students with disabilities; a population that also continues to increase. Initial research conducted yielded patterns associated with special education teacher attrition rates: teacher preparedness, mentorship, work demands, professional development, and personal support (Tyler & Brunner, p. 286 & Billingsley & Bettini, p. 709).

Within my institution, my sphere of influence focuses on teacher preparation as I have been supervising special education student teachers for the past eight years. Observations from my job have correlated with research, that student teachers are not exposed to enough field experiences within the program, especially given that special education covers 13 different disability categories.

As observed within my place of practice, identity development continues to be undeveloped with student teacher candidates for a variety of reasons: poor mentorship from supervisor/cooperating teacher, inability to implementing behavior management techniques, and lack of experiences to discover what works with their own abilities as a teacher. The disconnect between identity development and teacher preparation programs stunts professional growth in achieving the necessary skills needed to perform the full duties of a special educator. Dukes et al.

(2014) overall found that preservice candidates are not always afforded valuable and meaningful field placements which hinder professional and personal identity growth prior to graduation.

Billingsley and Bettini suggest that further research should, “investigate the extent to which specific aspects of initial preparation (e.g., program comprehensiveness; quality of field experiences) are associated with retention” (2019, p. 710). Therefore, the key feature on which I am focusing my theory of improvement resides within the student teacher field experience piece which, according to empathy interviews and research, shows to be pivotal in overall special education teacher preparation success.

My place of practice currently has a long-standing teacher preparation program that is recognized through CAEP accreditation. In talking with four alumni graduates who went through the special education teaching program, they indicated that their peers are struggling to remain within their job two or three years after graduation. Most indicated through empathy interviews that they experienced limited variety of field placement exposure or real-world work demands while student teaching compared to the work demands they are experiencing as full-time professionals.

Within my theory of improvement, I want to increase the field placement variety offered for special education teacher graduates to better prepare them for their future career, which ultimately enhances comprehensive identity development. Initially, my thoughts include access to more placements, through short observations, within early undergraduate requirement. Student teaching video observations or guest speakers can also expand what they are seeing and experiencing within the teaching field through group discussions. Overall, I predict that when I speak with current student teachers in the future, I would know my ideas have worked if reports

received back differ than the empathy interviews and surveys, I received during spring 2022, as well as, those students feeling more comfortable within their placements, specifically as a lead teacher.

2.1 Driver Diagram

I first started with my overall problem of practice driver diagram with focus on retention of PennWest’s special education graduates in the teacher profession. Noting the overall aim is a national issue which will be hard to measure within my sphere of influence, I decided to narrow my driver diagram to one major component that I did have influence on: teacher preparedness program. My aim therefore would be to increase PennWest University’s field service placement opportunities to three-four additional observational experiences within special education teacher preparation program by January 2024.

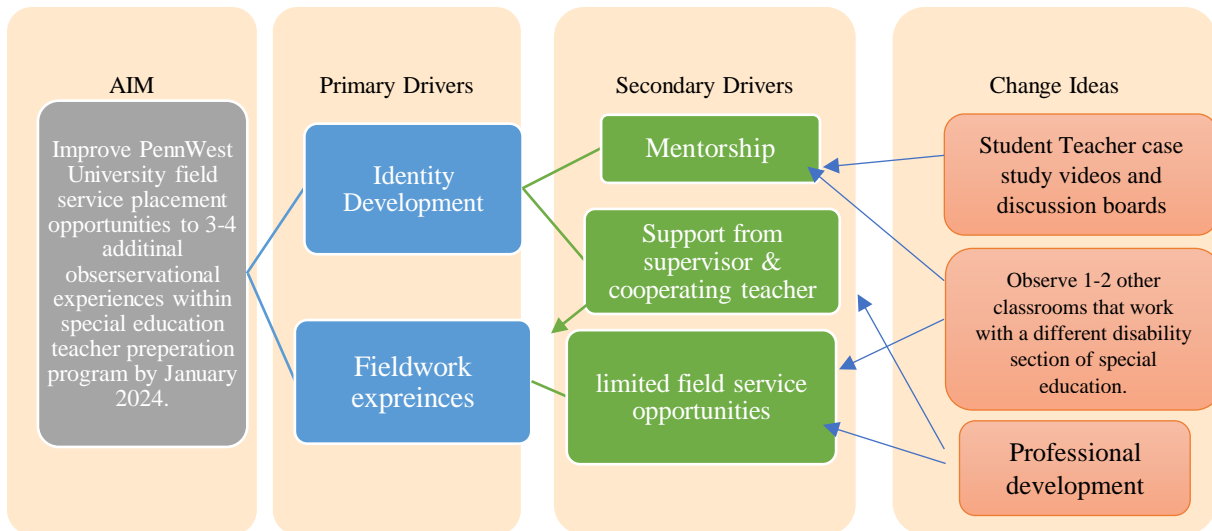


Figure 4 - Driver Diagram

There are two areas that are consistent primary drivers within teacher preparation: identity development and fieldwork experiences. One piece that develops a candidate’s identity

is through mentorship within fieldwork experience. Roegman et al. (2018) focus on understanding *how* preservice teachers negotiate discourse and develop teacher identity which can help teacher-preparatory programs better prepare candidates for shifting realities that occur within the profession. PennWest's Office of Field Services is revising this area within teacher preparation to enhance student teacher's experiences within the field that includes: support, meaningful and supportive feedback, and overall mentorship i.e., showing the candidate the roles and responsibilities of the special education field.

The other primary driver where I feel I can impact change is in the fieldwork experience of the teacher preparation program. Currently I am supervising student teachers in the field and I want to expand upon current practices to drive students toward an expanded field experience within special education. Within PennWest's teacher preparation program, students complete a pre-student teaching block (field) experience; one high incidence experience for four weeks and one low incidence experience for four weeks. Student teaching occurs the next semester where they progress through either a one or two eight-week experiences in either a high or low incidence placement. Those student teachers who are dual majors (Early Childhood/Special Education) receive only one eight-week placement during their student teaching semester compared to those students who major in straight special education program who receive 16 weeks within the semester.

The concern regarding the lack of variety is that special education teacher candidates are not given the opportunity for field experiences in the 13 disability categories that make up special education in elementary, middle, and high school contexts; an experience opportunity in which would be difficult for any university or college to offer an individual during their

educational program. Often, they may explore an elementary in one or two disability categories within special education, thus leaving them at a disadvantage when it comes to understanding the full scope of a special educator's job. By exposing student teacher candidates to more than two or three areas of special education, I am looking to improve their ability to reflect on their own areas of preference, strengths, and weaknesses.

The secondary drivers identified include: mentorship, support from cooperating teachers and university supervisors, and limited field service opportunities for special education teacher candidates. As an extension effecting the primary drivers, these three areas effect overall teacher preparation programs. Mentorship contributes as a driver as it is the responsibility of the cooperating teachers and supervisor to extend the candidates knowledge and abilities and encourage that growth as a professional. I can continue to work with the Office of Field Service to secure ideal mentor cooperating teachers, proven through prior successful placement observations, for my students to have their placements with.

The third secondary driver, limited field service opportunities, is the most concerning in my place of practice. Currently our university is in a rural area with limited special education classrooms to use for field experience purposes. The Office of Field Services has had to use inefficient cooperating teacher mentors as placement options, as indicated through prior empathy interviews, where it as mentioned that limited amounts of special education teachers in the area are willing to take on a student teacher; which hinders the experience. As a change in this area, I will look to supplementing with professional development whereby other experiences for students to watch and reflect on how they view the classroom and how they would handle a given situation.

2.2 Systems Measures

One potential process measure is through focus groups which can be conducted to assess student teacher's perspectives toward special education classes across the 13 disability categories and their identity as an educator. I completed a survey, spring 2022, to use as a baseline of which to compare experiences from alumni special education teachers on identity development and field experiences/opportunities within the teacher preparation program. Outcome measures would also be indicated by either securing more placement opportunities or not and continuing to implement cooperating teacher professional development. I will know I am reaching my change idea/intervention if my current student teachers are able to reflect on their own journey: i.e., confidence as a lead teacher, via a focus group interview. As a balance measure, I will know if change is upsetting the system if I receive any complaints or complements from cooperating teachers while I am in the field as well as any feedback from the office of field services.

2.2.1 Intervention

After reviewing the literature and conducting empathy interviews, focus groups, and surveys during spring 2022, I derived that extending the field experience time within the special education teacher preparation program by two to four weeks is a direction that is meaningful for change.

My idea involved my student teacher candidates to observe two additional special education classrooms during their field placement that showcase other special education classrooms that contain students with varied disabilities: i.e., autism, intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, etc. A classroom inventory was turned in via Desire2Learn (D2L) which is

PennWest's online platform where faculty collect assignments. Discussions were conducted during student teacher/supervisor visits to engage a conversation on what was viewed and the student teacher's perspectives.

The following inquiry question will guide my study of implementing the change idea:

1) Do students feel more comfortable (self-identity) applying for a position with any of the areas within special education (i.e., autism, learning support, life skills, emotional/behavior disturbances, etc.)?

Questions to help me understand what happened would be:

1) Is the dialogue had between student teacher and supervisor showing identity and professional growth and understanding?

2) What within student teaching would help further the student's education, especially their comfort level as a lead teacher?

Prior to intervention, I predicted that I will have a dialogue with student teachers that will demonstrate their growth in identity development as a result of exposure to greater variety of disabilities and environments.

2.2.2 Study Sample/Population

The participants within my research consisted of student teachers in spring 2023 at PennWest University at Clarion. These student teachers were in field placements in the school districts surrounding the university. Student sample size was eight to ten students during spring 2023.

I specifically picked this population because of my job responsibilities with the universities in supervising fourth year, student teachers within their placements as well as access

to each student's professional growth throughout their student teaching program. My current problem of practice focuses on improving self-identity in special education teacher candidates through more varied field experience as research suggests that those who are provided a well-rounded teacher preparation program have a higher likelihood of remaining within the special education profession beyond the first five years of employment. Student teachers are also required to take a professional seminar class to expand on field placement experiences.

2.2.3 Methods

Sources. I collected the data through qualitative focus groups. I asked similar questions, found in the Appendix, Item 3, which were administered in the previous focus group during spring 2022, as I was curious if their answers would show more independence and growth in confidence than the responses I received previously. The focus group included eight to ten participants who were currently enrolled in my institution's special education student teaching program. An additional identity-focused discussion prompt during weeks three through seven of the field experience placements was included within each student teacher's journal assignment. The goal was to gain a different perspective from those entrenched within the teacher preparatory program currently.

Concurrently, I also conducted a survey, found in the Appendix, Item 4, to gain a baseline of the student's experience within the teacher preparation program. I anticipated surveying eight to ten students, both dual early childhood/special education majors and special education-only majors, within my place of practice.

Data Analysis Process. For any and all qualitative focus groups, I used Zoom to acquire the transcription automatically from that program itself. I coded my transcript with code words

and categories to find common themes. From these categories, I was able to compare them to previous interviews/focus groups for comparison.

For my survey, I used Qualtrics and the students will rate each response on a 1-10 scale. The responses from the survey helped to drive further questions for the focus group and show effectiveness of the teacher preparation field experience with regards to identity development.

Discussion prompts were integrated into their week three through seven journal entries and included topics of: behavior management style, time management, and organization strategies; see Appendix, Item 2, for questions.

2.3 The Project Plan

2.3.1 PDSA Cycle Description

During the spring 2023 semester at PennWest University, I implemented my change idea in two cycles. Cycle one occurred during the first eight-week placement and cycle two occurred during the second eight-week placement within the full semester. I implemented my change with my fourth-year student teachers who are assigned to me as their supervisor. Placements are predetermined through the Office of Field Service prior to the semester beginning.

My change idea was to expose my student teachers to more disability categories within special education while they are teaching within their pre-selected placement site. An example would be if one of my student teachers is placed in a learning support classroom for eight-weeks, I had them observe two additional classrooms in the building that shows teachers working in classrooms for life skills, autism, emotional support, etc. These additional classroom observations were decided by the cooperating teacher and student teacher within the first week of their field experience placement. Students were required to complete an observation form on what strategies the teacher utilized to support the students. The observation form encompassed

components to help guide my student teachers on what to observe and guide their thinking about their own professional thinking on the subject/student matter and more specifically, their identity development. The observation form can be found in the Appendix, Item 1.

After their eight-week placement was completed, a focus group interview occurred via Zoom to discuss their findings and thoughts. I coded the focus group interviews to find any patterns that developed regarding special education exposure that supports them as a teacher prior to employment. Cycle two commenced in the following eight-week placement and followed the previous format unless any new modifications need adjusted after review.

I predicted that my students will be able to observe at least two extra classrooms to expose them to the different areas within special education more than if they remained solely within their predetermined setting. Each observation will last one class period, one day during their field experience placement. I predicted my student teachers will express within the focus group that they learned something new, either about the students we work with or about themselves working with students with disabilities; strategies not considered prior, interest in working with a particular group, other skills they would want more information on or practice with, etc.

As a contingency, if the student teacher's school only supports one or two disability categories, an option the student could use is to visit another school within their field placement school district: i.e., middle school, elementary school, or high school.

2.3.2 Data Gathering and Analysis Description

Data Gathered. I collected qualitative data through my focus groups. I coded the recorded transcript to look for any reoccurring themes. The data gathered from the two focus groups helped to drive any future change idea to help teacher preparation programs expose special education students to the different areas within our discipline in order to be more prepared prior to employment.

Analysis Description. Observation forms were given out to students on the first day of their placement. They had eight weeks to complete two additional observations within their school within a different special education classroom than their current assignment. Completed observation forms were submitted to D2L, Clarion's online platform that students use to turn in assignments regularly. I then used the observation forms and survey results to drive focus group conversation; especially within identity development of the individual and fieldwork exposure (thoughts/feelings of the individual)

I knew if change was occurring during focus group interviews. Using the information from the observation forms, along with the predetermined questions listed previously, I conducted my focus group via Zoom with audio transcription recording. I planned to thematically code the transcript, looking for common themes regarding their additional exposure to different special education rooms; along with their growth as a professional (identity). Change will be seen if I saw themes appear such as: having more exposure to make good professional decisions on career paths after graduation, confidence in themselves as a professional, sharing experiences through discussion board prompts of observing things they would have missed had they not observed, etc.

2.4 Conclusion

Through multiple exposures to different special education rooms within a student teacher's field placement, the hope was to better prepare the student for the work demands they would encounter within the workforce. Each student observed different classrooms, teachers, and disability categories that are contingent upon their school and district availability. The different experiences offered further information and insight for the candidates within discussion board prompts and focus group discussions. Utilizing two PDSA trials will also allow reflection and change from one trial to the next, offering more data and influence on the study.

3.0 PDSA Results

PDSA intervention occurred during spring semester 2023 on the Clarion campus of PennWest University. Four measures were gathered throughout both PDSA Cycle 1 and PDSA Cycle 2: survey, Classroom Inventory worksheet, additional journal prompts, and focus group interviews.

3.1 Survey Results

Surveys were sent to students within their first and second student teaching placements one week prior to their focus group interview. The objective was to compare data received from the previous semester to see if any correlations could be attained with more samples with regards to Clarion's teacher preparation program. Any data of significance would be addressed during the focus group discussion. Table 1 below indicates the data collected and recorded.

Between the pre-intervention data (spring 2022) and PDSA Cycles 1 and 2 (spring 2023) the data indicated similar findings about the 15 students surveyed. The majority indicated with high correlation (scores 8-10) that they were satisfied with the teacher preparation program they completed and felt supported by their professor's instructional support. The majority of the 15 students indicated high correlation (score of 8-10) with regards to their pre-service teaching experience and first and second student teaching placements (when applicable). Further, the majority showed high correlation (scores 8-10) that they felt comfortable to teach in any school with the knowledge learned throughout the program. The majority also agreed that they were not concerned about working with parents once in their profession.

Data Topics of Note. The majority of the students in both the pre-intervention data as well as throughout the two PDSA cycles indicated they would have liked more teaching field experience incorporated within their undergraduate program. Of specific note, a new question within the survey, as part of the PDSA cycle intervention, asked the students about behavior management. The majority of the two PDSA cycle groups indicated concern in managing classroom behaviors.

Table 1 - Teacher Preparation Survey

	Pre- Intervention Spring 2022	PDSD Cycle 1 February- March 2023	PDSD Cycle 2 March- April 2023
Students = <i>n</i>	6	6	3
1. Home Residence Area			
City	-	1	-
Suburb	1	1	3
Rural	5	4	-
2. Attracted to choose Clarion due to known teacher program?			
High-Correlation (8-10)	3	6	3
Neutral (4-7)	2	-	-
Low-Correlation (1-3)	1	-	-
3. Satisfied with the Teacher Preparation program you are enrolled in?			
High-Correlation (8-10)	4	6	3
Neutral (4-7)	2	-	-
Low-Correlation (1-3)	-	-	-
4. How often did you apply the techniques and strategies when student teaching?			
High-Correlation (8-10)	6	5	3
Neutral (4-7)	-	1	-
Low-Correlation (1-3)	-	-	-
5. Feelings on Professor's instructional support during undergrad program which			

influenced or enhanced your teaching instruction.			
High-Correlation (8-10)	6	5	3
Neutral (4-7)	-	1	-
Low-Correlation (1-3)	-	-	-
6. Rate Pre-Service Teaching Experience			
High-Correlation (4-5 Stars)	5	6	2
Neutral (3 stars)	1	-	1
Low-Correlation (1-2 stars)	-	-	-
7. Rate First Student Teaching Placement Experience			
High-Correlation (4-5 Stars)	5	5	3
Neutral (3 stars)	-	1	-
Low-Correlation (1-2 stars)	1	-	-
Rate Second Student Teaching Placement Experience			
High-Correlation (4-5 Stars)	2	N/A	2
Neutral (3 stars)	0	N/A	1
Low-Correlation (1-2 stars)	1	N/A	-
8. Would you recommend Clarion offer more field placements or observations within classrooms throughout the teacher preparation program?			
Yes	5	3	2
No	-	-	-
Maybe	1	3	1
9. How concerned are you in managing classroom behaviors?			
High-Correlation (8-10)	N/A	6	2
Neutral (4-7)	N/A	-	1
Low-Correlation (1-3)	N/A	-	-
10. How concerned are you about preparing modifications and accommodations within the classroom?			
High-Correlation (8-10)	1	-	1
Neutral (4-7)	2	4	1
Low-Correlation (1-3)	3	2	1
11. How concerned are you about collaborating with parents of children with disabilities?			
High-Concern (8-10)	1	-	1

Neutral (4-7)	2	3	-
Low-Concern (1-3)	3	3	2
12. Do you feel you could teach anywhere you wished to go with the knowledge and experiences you are learning at Clarion?			
High-Correlation (8-10)	4	5	2
Neutral (4-7)	2	1	1
Low-Correlation (1-3)	-	-	-

3.2 PDSA Cycle 1 (February – March)

Journal Prompts. Six students completed an additional journal prompt question that focused on identity development (see Item 2 in Appendix). Analysis of the journals showed that each of the students have sound ideas with regards to classroom arrangement, communication, and finding resources if they were not provided originally to plan and teach concepts/skills. Ideas included using multiple and varied internet resources to enhance their academic selections within their classrooms, clear classroom arrangements that allowed for flow and ease of site to the board or academic instructor, etc. Behavior management strategies were all observed by the students, but each student disagreed with the full behavior technique used by their cooperating teachers. They each mentioned that they liked parts of the behavior strategies and would use the parts they agreed with to build their own classroom.

Teacher Candidate Worksheets. Three of the six student teachers completed the teacher candidate worksheet. Reasons for the incompleteness by the other three were not given. Among the students that did complete the worksheet, there was clear evidence on identity reflection;

using statements such as “I definitely would teach students using this style” or “in my classroom I would keep lessons livelier for student engagement.”

The teacher candidate worksheet came up as an end topic within the focus group interview. The three students who completed the worksheet all verbally praised the assignment and stated that they appreciated the chance to see a different room that worked with different students in special education other than their own assigned placement. One student noted that her pre-student teaching placements and current student teaching placement were with the same special education category (Learning Support) and she welcomed the opportunity to see other options within the special education field. All three reflected verbally that they learned a lot about their professional preferences in addition to gaining increased knowledge of the field overall.

Focus Group Interviews. Four students out of six participated in the focus group interview via Zoom. Questions asked during this interview can be found in the Appendix, Item 3. Utilizing Zoom allowed the program to transcribe our interaction during the interview, which I then coded afterwards for common categories that came up; see Table 2 below.

Table 2 - Focus Group PDSA 1 Interview Coding

Categories	CODES	Representative Quote
Behavior Management	crowd control v discipline,	"I think that there's just other ways to manage behaviors, and like unfocused students, rather than just yelling at them" "Just being calm and finding other ways to solve problems"
Differentiating	different abilities within one room, different support systems at home, teaching differently than classical instruction	"All of the kids are coming in with multiple disabilities.", "they don't always have the parents with them to help them with their work.", "you're trying to accommodate that, and that doesn't always look like a typical classroom."
Discipline Policy	personal behavior management v other teacher's room's behavior rules and expectations	"Setting up that personal philosophy; how far is too far?" "Struggling with and trying to develop my theory on discipline."
Co-op benefits	hands-off approach, feedback	"I haven't seen the next step of what to do with the information, and where to put it, and what to relay to parents, and that aspect of it", "I think it was hard for me to like, find the time to like, just jump in. I was waiting for her to tell me like when she wanted me to start teaching,"; "She's like, you know, how to teach at this point it's your classroom. You figure out what you want to do, and I think that has been really beneficial for me."
Classroom inventory	beneficial	"I also went to a Life Skills classroom, which I also don't have much experience with. And this teacher it was actually her first-year teaching in that room, too. So that was interesting to see just how she was still like trying to figure everything out."

When asked first about what the hardest aspect of being a special educator was, differentiation was a common theme. Interestingly, since all four student teachers were in different special education rooms (life skills, learning support, and co-teaching), they each had different ideas of why differentiating was difficult. Their answers ranged from the multitude of different needs within one room that needed different accommodations, academic strategies, and/or modifications at one time, differentiating with the support given from home to balance the instructional needs started at school, to using non-traditional education techniques and not being taken seriously by general education teachers. One student expanded on what she meant about not being taken seriously by stating that often times special educators have to use instructional games to help teach harder concepts that appear to look like the kids are just having fun from the vantage point of the general education teacher, when in fact, the students are learning in a different way.

When the students were asked about what aspects of student teaching helped develop identity development, they unanimously talked about behavior management and behavior policy. Specifically, behavior management was defined as overall classroom management and not the process of behavior management with students. The students touched upon a common thread that this was their weakest area as reflected by how they chose to answer their survey question previously regarding behavior management. The students did agree that they were exposed to how behavior should be monitored and managed better in student teaching than in pre-student teaching since they had more time to establish a routine. The difficulty they all expressed was the inexperience in balancing crowd control and discipline; the balance between giving warnings, following through, and writing students up for serious infractions, especially given the nature of special education and how frustration levels can rise quickly with their students' academics.

Between behavior management and discipline policy, all four student teachers remarked that they had a way to discuss or practice strategies more in classes previous to student teaching. One student remarked one hurdle being that the classroom is still the cooperating teacher's room or the general education room where they were co-teaching; the student teacher often had to abide by that teacher's behavior rules which differed at times from their own. As far as identity development, it is clear from their statements that they recognize the need for improvement but do have an idea of where to start; as stated by one student, "just being calm and finding other ways to solve problems."

Switching the questions to their perspective on field placement value, student teachers discussed that their placements helped to solidify their choice, whether they liked special education as a whole or even the grade they were teaching. One student teacher determined that they did not like teaching high school and preferred elementary but added that the experience taught her she could teach high school if she needed to. Other comments on the field placements included the experience of seeing what they did and did not like to take with them into their own classroom; i.e., teaching strategies, room arrangements, organization, and behavior management.

The final question was in regards to their cooperating teacher's value that aided their growth as a professional. All four student teachers stated that their co-op's were hands-off, which they defined as allowing the student teachers the ability to teach as they saw fit, but the co-op would step in should it be needed. All four student teachers agreed this was beneficial as it allowed them to try ideas and better develop themselves as teachers. One unvaluable piece mentioned was the lack of feedback given in one circumstance, which made the placement harder on the student teacher since they were not sure if what they were doing was correct all of

the time. Overall, all four student teachers felt this was a positive placement with regards to having helpful mentors.

3.2.1 PDSA Cycle 1 Reflection

Prior to beginning my second cycle, I reflected on items that I wanted to remain the same and/or items that needed altered. I felt the combination of survey, journal prompts, teacher candidate worksheets, and focus group interviews were still valuable in collecting identity development data. The combination of these methods allowed me a complete perspective on the teacher preparation program, specifically in regards to identity development. Within cycle one, I personally did not have student teachers to observe, and my colleagues ran my change idea with my directions and guidance. While I did receive data that supported identity development, I directed my change idea personally in cycle 2. I focused my observations and conversations in-person with my student teachers to highlight identity development as it related to their lesson in the hopes that they would begin to make more connections for themselves.

3.3 PDSA Cycle 2 (March-April)

Journal Prompts. All three students completed their extra journal responses during this cycle. Analysis showed each student has a definitive plan when it comes to room arrangement, parent communication, time management, and utilizing resources. As seen in the first cycle, the biggest issue discussed was on behavior management. Particularly in this cycle, the students in two of the three placements indicated that their co-op struggled with behavior management themselves and did not have an effective classroom plan in place. One room indicated that there was more chaos and inconsistent rewards being used, while another mentioned that verbal warnings were issues more often than necessary before action was taken. Both concluded they

would want a concrete classroom behavior plan but were unsure what they would look like or detail. Interestingly, the student who reported a clear behavior management plan was the student in an Emotional/Behavior room which was set up with clear routines, expectations, and reward systems.

Teacher Candidate Worksheets. All three students completed the teacher candidate worksheet. Reflections indicated that they learned new ideas regarding academic strategies, behavior management, and differential learning. Within the focus group interview, all three students discussed that, although it was another assignment to complete in an already busy schedule, they were excited to have an opportunity to explore another room where they did not have prior experience. One student took the opportunity to follow her students into the general education room to see what inclusion looked like and found that her students were placed in the back of the room to play Bingo instead of interacting with their peers. She noted in her worksheet that she was dismayed to see this occur, and it did not reflect true inclusion, which involves being educated with typical peers equally. A second student also took the opportunity to follow her pull-out students into the general education room and noticed the lack of patience, accommodations, and modifications being applied by the general education teacher. She mentioned in our focus group interview that it explained a great deal why her students were sent down to her room to “cool down” so often in the day. A third student completed this assignment within an Autistic support room and found she enjoyed it as much as her own current placement which helped her to express that she would apply for a job in both areas of special education.

Focus Group Interviews. All three students participated in the focus group interview via Zoom. Questions asked during this interview can be found in the Appendix, Item 3. Utilizing

Zoom allowed the program to transcribe our interaction during the interview, which I then coded for common themes that emerged; see Table 3 below.

Table 3 - Focus Group PDSA 2 Interview Coding

Categories	CODES	Representative Quote
Behavior Management	difficult, inconsistent	If I try a strategy, my co-op will end up giving them the reward because she feels bad, which negates my behavior plan. No parent support.
General Education v Special Education	communication, expectations, unappreciation, and collaboration	No communication when schedules change. Gen Ed teachers don't see how much work behind the scenes is completed daily. Gen Ed teachers don't always display the patience needed for our students in their classrooms.
Classroom Experience	Hands on, more university supervisor feedback	Communication with co-op on how things are really done within the classroom and with parents. Case Studies and videos in the undergrad classroom are easy - experiencing it first hand is hard but needed. Not sure still what goes on beyond the academics (parent communication, IEP's, etc).
Co-op benefits	more feedback needed, relectant to take them to non-academic job responsibility opportunities to view (parent meeting, IEP)	Everything I do is "fine, good" and I want to hear how I could have changed things.
Field Experience and Expectation Tools	Longer field placement, more supervisor visits	I receive better information from university supervisor and I wish they came more than once to guide me. I hate the CPAST as an evaluation tool - if I happen to not show one aspect in that lesson, it counts as a zero. It's hard to appease the CPAST, especially in special education, when the tool was designed for general overviews of teaching.

On being asked the first questions regarding what the hardest part of special education was, all three students mentioned behavior management first. Two of the three students in particular have a placement with limited classroom behavior management in place, and each student expressed their frustration in dealing with the chaos and inconsistent rewards and consequences. One student teacher expressed frustration when she tried to create her own class behavior system and when she did not reward one of her students since they did not meet her behavior goal, the cooperating teacher overruled her and rewarded the student anyway because “she felt bad for him.” The third student who was not having issues with behavior management

expressed that because her room was designated as emotional/behavioral support, the teacher had great behavioral systems in place.

While the first PDSA cycle discussed this matter more in depth, this group of students pivoted straight to the difference between general education and special education. All three mentioned varied frustrations on this topic, ranging from: lack of communication, expectations, patience, and implementation of accommodations/modifications. When asked for more detail, one student went on to explain that when general education schedules change, especially around the time that high-stakes state testing would be occurring, the special education teacher tends to be the last one to know if they were told at all. All three mentioned that students would often arrive late to their class without notice which disrupted routines and academic plan made by the special educator. All three student teachers were also frustrated as they felt their work as a special educator, as well as their co-ops, were not appreciated by general educators. More specifically, they noted that general educators often viewed their position as special educators as “easy jobs”, especially when they “only have two kids in the room.” All three student teachers agreed further that this perspective was also shared by the students’ parents which made interventions and continued academic practice at home harder to accomplish. Teacher patience and implementation of accommodations/modifications was the last piece of this question address by the student teachers. All three expressed frustration when they continually viewed their students being sent out of the room quickly and more frequently than their typical peers. The student teachers remarked that while behavior plans and systems were in place, the general educators often did not follow them, which resulted in them being sent back to the special educator’s room.

Moving on to the second question regarding what aspect of student teaching increased their identity, all students pointed to the fact that they were able to experience the field itself. All three mentioned how COVID disrupted their fieldwork observations in early undergraduate classes and that those opportunities were replaced with videos and case studies. They felt the videos and case studies did not capture the true essence of the profession they now witnessing first hand in pre-student teaching fieldwork and student teaching placements. All three valued hearing from their cooperating teachers how the school and classroom runs and the different strategies they employ. One student added that in her interviews with future employers, they all mentioned that they were shocked to hear of how much time in the field Clarion's students received, far outweighing other candidates' fieldwork experience from other universities. All three student teachers were appreciative for the placements and found value in each one.

Moving forward to question three on value of field placement for professional growth, the students all felt that their individual placements were of value and that they collaborated well with their co-op. The only downside mentioned was that they felt their co-op's all gave positive feedback and limited any constructive feedback for professional growth. This conversation did lead to an off-topic conversation from the student teachers that because of the lack of constructive feedback they had received in both pre-student teaching field and student teaching placements, they wished that the university supervisor came out more often, especially during pre-student teaching field placements. They all agreed that the supervisor had valuable information and provided the constructive feedback they needed along with conversations about what to try next.

Finally, when asked about the value of the cooperating teacher that aided or hindered their experience, the student teachers agreed that they did value the conversation had with their co-op about the day-to-day details within the room/school. The student teachers all mentioned that they wished they had been exposed to more things outside of teaching the students within the room; i.e., collaboration between general educators and special educators, understanding Children and Youth Services (CYS) and other organizational paperwork/processes, active parent communication methods, and interaction with parents. They also were uncomfortable with the thought of leading an IEP meeting for the first time once employed. All three agreed they were extremely comfortable with writing an IEP for a student but where most uncomfortable in predicting and answering questions from other administrators, teachers, and parents in addition to effectively mitigating any intense conversations that might occur.

3.4 Prediction v. Outcome

Results from the survey, journal entries, Classroom Characteristic Inventory, and focus group all indicate that my prediction prior to implementation was indeed correct. I predicted that:

My students will be able to observe at least two extra classrooms to expose them to the different areas within special education more than if they remained solely within their predetermined setting. I predict my student teachers will express within the focus group that they learned something new, either about the students we work with or about themselves working with students with disabilities; strategies not considered prior, attraction of working with a particular group, other skills they would want more information on or practice with, etc.

Students were able to observe at least one classroom outside of their assigned placement and, in most cases, were able to see two additional settings within their school. Within the focus group, students successfully expressed learning something new, whether from the additional classroom observed, journal topics that helped students ask questions to their cooperating teacher's that previously the student teacher would not have thought of to have asked, or ideas they saw within the classroom that they found undesirable for themselves to use based on their preferences and style as a special educator. Students in the focus group were able to describe missed opportunities such as live parent-teacher communication, IEP meetings, general education-special education collaboration meetings, etc.

4.0 Learning and Action

Within both the first and second PDSA cycle, the extra journal prompts did provide an opportunity for student teachers to engage with the cooperating teacher on a topic or questions that they might not have originally asked themselves. The students reflected within the focus group that this information was valuable and had they not asked their co-op, they would have missed out on new information.

One successful aspect from this PDSA study, directly tied to my driver diagram and fishbone, was the Classroom Characteristic Inventory. Students in the two PDSA cycles all expressed the value of completing the assignment and discussed during the focus group how the opportunity allowed them to gain new perspective regarding how their students were performing in the general education class or cementing their desire or willingness to teach in a special education other than the one assigned. Sciuchetti et al. (2018) addresses this positive correlation between preservice teachers increasing special education area exposure; that by observing/experiencing a variety of special education experiences, the candidates were more versed in professional disposition, responsibilities, collaboration, expectations, work demands and overall class flow/management which broadens overall professional awareness.

4.1 Key Findings

During the focus group interviews, multiple key findings were noted. One common and consistent theme found from the baseline focus group in the spring 2021 and the two PDSA cycle focus groups spring 2023 was the need for more experience with classroom behavior

management. All 15 student teachers reported feeling uncomfortable walking into their own classroom once employed and being able to effectively put a classroom management plan in place right away. Within the second PDSA Cycle group, it was stated by the student teachers that they were comfortable putting together a Positive Behavior Support Plan (PBSP) for a single student who required one due to a disability but were unsure of the management options available to them that would be effective for a whole class of students whose educational and behavioral needs varied. Butler and Monda-Amaya (2016) discuss this insecure feeling within their research, indicating that students working on behavior management in teacher preparatory programs felt ill prepared and preservice teachers felt anxious about managing behaviors in their own classroom. Butler and Monda-Amaya (2016) go on to indicate that most preservice student teachers do not always receive a field experience placement where the candidate has ample opportunity to implement classroom management, whether with a whole class or with an individual student. While the field placements given to student teachers at Clarion are either one or two eight-week special education placements, the time needed to effectively view and create a classroom management plan may still not be achievable in that timeframe. Paired with being assigned a cooperating teacher demonstrating ineffective classroom management creates more of a barrier in learning this skill.

Another issue present among all three student teachers was the evaluation tool the university supervisors and co-ops had to use as part of their overall feedback and data collection mechanism. The education college has been using the Candidate Preservice Assessment of Student Teaching (CPAST), an evaluation tool developed by The Ohio State University as a means of collecting data for CAEP. Because it is developed for all education majors, the tool has

general guidelines that are designed to measure basics among: early childhood, secondary/middle schools, and special education. Student teachers in the second PDSA cycle group discussed issue with this tool, particularly because in special education there are many times lessons cannot be taught using the pre-designed general template guidelines; one example includes using technology. In special education classrooms, direct instruction is used as an evidenced-based practice, specifically in reading and math instruction. The downside to this strategy is that no technology is used. Student teachers then receive a zero out of three for this category since it is not observed during the lesson at that time, even though in other lessons the student teacher does incorporate technology. The information provided about the CPAST by the student teachers directly spoke to what Pua et al. (2021) spoke to in their research that universities and colleges are relying on research-based and commercially available observation systems which often do not reflect the theoretical foundation of special education. These systems are usually retrofitted for special education and thereby, do not show true effectiveness of preservice teachers' abilities instructing (p. 6).

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Change. In discussing strengths and weaknesses of the change, I will turn back to my previous inquiry questions stated earlier:

2) Do students feel more comfortable (self-identity) applying for a position with any of the areas within special education (i.e., autism support, learning support, life skills, emotional/behavior support, etc.)?

Questions to help me understand what happened would be:

1) Is the dialogue had between student teacher and supervisor showing identity and professional growth and understanding?

2) *What within student teaching would help further the student's education, especially their comfort level as a lead teacher?*

4.2 Strengths

Results from this study show strength when it comes to students feeling more comfortable applying for a position in any area of special education. The Classroom Characteristic Inventory was found to be a valuable tool to provide opportunity to see other classrooms within special education that the students were not previously exposed to; granting them the opportunity to make a determination if that area of special education was of interest to them for employment. However, granting preservice teachers this opportunity prior to employment is only the beginning to securing that they are *comfortable* within each aspect of special education as far as differentiating instruction, classroom and behavior management, implementing evidenced-based practices, and executing meaningful and effective accommodations and modifications.

Results from the focus group interview indicated positive growth from the student teachers in identity development. Each student could express not only the positives they were gaining from their experience but also the areas they were missing within their placements: after school meetings, progress reporting records being sent home, how to prepare for an IEP meeting, etc. Especially during the second PDSA cycle with my direct interaction with my student teachers at their placements, it was encouraging to see that each preservice teacher used our observation time together to ask about new strategies to try, both academic and behavioral.

4.3 Weaknesses

The second inquiry question is the weakness of this research during both PDSA cycles. Student teachers consistently expressed in focus groups and journals that their cooperating teachers did not offer meaningful and constructive feedback to help them grow as a professional. The student teachers were looking for any new idea to try to hone their abilities, even if the lesson they created was successful. During the focus group, the student teachers in both cycles mentioned that they knew they were missing out on work demand pieces that make up the job of special educator: IEP meeting preparation, live parent interaction, collaboration among general education and special education and other professionals within the building, etc. The student teachers felt their main responsibility during student teaching was to teach the material with limited interaction with the other work demands of the job. While they did have conversations with their co-ops regarding those limitations, it was the hands-on experiences the student teachers wished they had.

4.4 Limitations

Two limitations of this study were considered for data analysis and future considerations. First, the generalization of the results is limited since the sample size was small within this study. Replicating the study multiple times with more student teacher samples is recommended to corroborate the results founded in this study. The second limitation was on the topic of overall exposure of every detail that entails a special educator. It is currently not possible for a single university or college to cover everything within the special education job in full detail, especially those that are only learned best through life experience over time; i.e., behavior management strategies.

4.5 Next Steps and Implications

Suggestions. Moving forward, I concluded from my research that the Classroom Characteristic Inventory continue to be used. Further research would need to be completed on whether the full scope of the Inventory needs to be completed or just the reflection section at the end for post-observation supervisor-preservice teacher conversation. The Classroom Characteristic Inventory assignment plus the conversation/feedback is needed to assess the preservice teacher's thoughts and highlight the possibility, or lack thereof, to the desirability of working in that area of special education post-graduation. This intervention itself is simple to complete and not time consuming, both necessary considerations when including another assignment for the student teacher to complete in limited time. This activity increases the opportunities to explore other special education classrooms; something research suggests is needed continuously by preservice special educators prior to employment.

While the additional journal prompts helped to demonstrate that students do indeed know their preferences with parent communication, resources, and classroom management, the prompts themselves did little to sustain the issue; increasing preservice teacher's identity within special education. It is recommended that the additional journal prompt be discontinued in the student teaching placement; however, further research and study should consider using such prompts within pre-student teaching field placement and/or first- and second-year classes to begin the process of identity development in those areas. One final thought on the journal prompt for further consideration for change is using them as weekly discussion prompts among the student teachers instead of written individual assignments. Student teachers may be exposed to other situations and information from their peers if it is used as a discussion dialogue, whether

through a learning platform like D2L or live during a professional development session during their placement.

Further research and change ideas are necessary to address the consistent issue of classroom management. During the focus group, the student teachers made it clear that they were comfortable completing all the steps, including implementation of a Functional Behavior Assessment Plan and Positive Behavior Support Plan. All the student teachers in the baseline and PDSA cycle focus groups struggled with classroom behavior mitigation and overall reward systems that would also work with the different needs, both academically and behaviorally. One aspect that caused the biggest concern was the different behavior systems utilized in general and special education classrooms and that a student would be in throughout one day. Considering the use of one management system for all classrooms might be a better approach. One potential draw back would be the fidelity of each teacher in their execution of the class behavior plan and if the overall system in place would work with each individual teacher's style. One positive would be the establishment of routine and consistency, which research suggests is conducive to productive learning, especially for students with disabilities.

A further consideration regarding classroom management is to include and/or expand the topic within a professional development session during the student teaching experience. Universities sometimes offer a practicum session where students report to the university for the day, instead of their field placement, to discuss more in-depth topics that preservice teachers often struggle with most. One of three of PennWest's campuses currently has one in place and the main topics covered are questioning and tiered instruction. Including a classroom behavior management session would benefit the students, especially if they can bring their current

struggles with them to discuss and brainstorm innovative ideas to try out when they return to the classroom.

5.0 Reflections

Throughout this process as both a leader and improver, I learned the most about being an improver for the change idea(s) implemented in this study. As a leader, I learned how to develop forms that asked essential and targeted questions which yielded better qualitative data.

Orchestrating sound research also involved being a leader to direct the change idea as I had planned so that I could gain the meaningful information I was seeking. As previously stated, I learned the most as an improver during this educational process. The biggest hurdle I faced from the beginning was narrowing my big world problem down to one that was actionable to implement change which then helped me focus my research directly toward my place of practice where meaningful change and action could occur.

Throughout this process I also learned that improvement itself might yield small results or more information that can be built upon by another researcher. I saw this first hand in my research as my Classroom Characteristic Inventory which produced a small improvement toward the overall goal of identity development among preservice special educators. While the tool did not correct the issue in full, it will provide beginning growth in this area and become part of a bigger scheme later on as other tools and strategies are used to continue the change process with identity development. Working alongside the Classroom Characteristic Inventory tool was the focus groups which gave me meaningful and valuable qualitative data to begin the work for new change ideas.

As a scholar involved in this improvement process, I learned the value of researching prior studies that either yielded small change results, gathered more qualitative information for future growth, consideration, and development, or both. I found it interesting that similar authors continued their research throughout their investigative inquiry years and new authors working with them brought new perspective and angles to the topic; Billingsley whom I referenced in this paper worked on preservice teacher attrition from the 1990-present.

Moving forward, I will continue to work on improving preservice special educator's instruction and experiences using the improvement process. This topic is important work to gain a foothold on the growing issue of special education attrition among teaching professionals, especially with more students being identified for needing services than certified professionals available to properly educate and service. Should my target of interest shift due to job or needs seen within the profession, I would still work through the improvement process to help narrow down the bigger issue seen on the outside and enact change on the smaller building blocks that make up the Problem of Practice (PoP). Nurturing change in that fashion will yield new avenues on which to shift change ideas or enhance ones showing small growth.

Appendix

Appendix Item 1: Observation Form

Department of Special Education and Disability Policy Studies

Classroom Characteristics Inventory

Date: _____ Time: _____ Subject: _____

1. Focus on Curriculum:

- a. What is the objective of the lesson?
- b. Direct Instruction Yes No
- c. Learning objective is evident to the students:
____ Evident ____ Not Evident ____ Unable to determine

2. Focus on Instruction:

- a. Identify the instructional practices being used. *Select all that apply.*
____ Modeling ____ Guided Practice ____ Providing Clear Directions
____ Discussion ____ Lecture ____ Teacher-directed Q&A
____ Providing Practice ____ Learning Centers ____ Hands-on Experiences
- b. Identify grouping format. *Select all that apply.*
____ Whole group ____ Small group ____ Paired ____ Individual
- c. Identify research-based instructional strategies. *Select all that apply.*
____ Setting clear objectives ____ Providing immediate feedback
____ Reinforcing effort ____ Repetition
____ Practice of skills/concept ____ Task analysis for involved tasks
____ Cueing/Prompting ____ Questioning
____ Clarity of instruction ____ Reciprocal teaching
____ Meta-cognitive strategies ____ Vocabulary instruction
- d. Identify instructional materials. *Select all that apply.*
____ Computer software ____ Overhead/board/flip chart ____ Video
____ Manipulatives ____ Published print material ____ Web sites
____ Hand held technology ____ Real-word objects ____ Worksheets

Lab/activity sheet Student created material Oral
 Textbook Other: (Specify)_____

3. Focus on the Learner:

a. Identify student actions. *Select all that apply.*

- Listening (receiving information) Practicing or applying a skill
- Reading
- Writing
- Mathematics
- Demonstrating a skill Speaking/Discussion
- Test/quiz
- Presentation
- Working with hands-on

b. Determine level of student work. Refer to DOK wheel. *Select all that apply.*

- Level 1 – Recall Level 2 - Skill/Concept
- Level 3 – Strategic Thinking Level 4 – Extended Thinking

c. Determine tools/strategies used to show what students know and can do in relation to the lesson objective(s)

- Vocal response from student Use of AAC to respond
- Product completed by student (worksheet, practice examples, book work)
- Assessment by teacher Prompted responses accepted by teacher
- Teacher led task Independent work task

d. Determine levels of engagement

- Highly engaged – Most students are authentically engaged
- Well managed – Students are willingly compliant, ritually engaged
- 50% or fewer students are engaged in the lesson

e. Determine active engagement strategies used to support participation and learning. *Select all that apply.*

- Response cards Choral responding
- Response signals Dry erase boards
- Other: _____

f. Evidence of formative or summative assessment

- Formative assessment Describe: _____
- Summative assessment Describe: _____

g. Was there observed evidence of decisions made from assessment information

- _____ Yes Describe: _____
 _____ No Describe: _____
- h. Evidence that the teacher is responding to the different learning needs in the classroom
 _____ A great deal of evidence _____ Some evidence
 _____ None _____ Unable to determine
- i. Evidence that shows differentiation used to meet the different learning needs in the classroom

Observer Reflections:

In what ways has the lesson you've observed impacted your thinking about your future classroom practices?

What type of behavior management plan was used by the teacher? Is this one you would consider using and why or why not?

How will you apply what you learned/saw today to improve your own planning and teaching of future lessons?

Would this be an area of special education that you are interested in teaching? Why or why not?

Appendix Item 2 – Additional Journal Prompts within Student Teaching (Ask in Weeks Three-Seven)

- How does your cooperating teacher communicate with his/her student's parents/family. Do you feel they communicate enough? How would you engage with your student's parents as the lead teacher?
- How would you rearrange the room to better navigate and instruct your students? (Draw a diagram) How will this lay out help you better instruct your students?
- Describe the behavior techniques you observed from your cooperating teacher? Would you use these as a lead teacher in your classroom? Why or why not?

- What additional resources would you want to use within this classroom if it were your own? List items that would need purchased (along with price) and other items you found online (minimum of two).
- How does your cooperating teacher manage their time to get everything done? What advice do they have for you to keep yourself from falling behind?

Appendix Item 3 – Focus Group Protocol
Focus Group Questions

a) Introductions. When introducing the session, I will begin with an opening where I welcome the participants, describe the focus study intentions/purposes, and establish ground rules. Intentions will be relayed to the participants that the questions asked today will help myself within my research regarding special education teacher attrition rates among novice teachers with the intention to improve teacher preparation programs and identity development, specifically within my place of practice. Rules for the participants would include: allowing one person to speak at one time, being open minded to different perspectives, as both positive and negative experiences/thoughts will help drive my research, and that this space is considered a safe place to speak honestly.

Topics and Questions

Topic #1: Identity Development

- 1) What do you believe is the hardest aspect of being a special educator?
- 2) Identity development is all about discovering a person’s strengths and needs within any given profession. What aspects of student teaching helped develop your identity as a special educator?

Topic #2: Field Placements

1) How would you describe the value that your assigned student teaching field placements had for you as a professional?

2) What was valuable from your cooperating teacher that aided your professional growth during field experience? Were there any needed aspects you wished you had guidance on from your cooperating teacher?

c) Timing and Off Task Conversations. Introductions, intentions, and ground rules should last only the first five minutes of the session to allow for question and discussion time for the remaining 55 minutes at minimum. If conversations get off track, I can introduce a new question or ask an expansion question on a topic that was recently brought up in response to my previous question.

Setting and Transcription. I will be conducting my interview via my Pitt Zoom account. This application has the functionality to record and translate the interview; leaving me the opportunity to asking expansion questions and note take any highlighted terms or quotes for future reference.

I will also collect qualitative data through the observation forms used and submitted by the students highlighting their thoughts and feelings on their experience. Observation forms can then be used as a springboard within the focus groups, especially if a particular insight is gained/mentioned.

Appendix Item 4 - Survey/Questionnaire Protocol and Instrument

My survey will go out to five to ten participants and focus on those currently enrolled in my institution's special education teacher preparation with those enrolled within student teaching currently.

Questions

1. What best describes where you went to school?
 - a. Rural
 - b. Suburban
 - c. City
 - d. Prefer not to answer
2. On a scale of 1 -10, how much were you attracted to coming to Clarion because of our teaching program? 1- 10 scale given.
3. How satisfied are you with the teacher preparation program you are enrolled in? 1-10 scale given.
4. After progressing through your undergraduate instruction, how often did you apply the techniques and strategies when teaching students with disabilities? 1-10 scale given.
5. Did you feel your professor's instructional support during your undergraduate program influenced or enhanced your teaching instruction? 1-10 scale given.
6. How would you rate your block experience placement based on professional growth? 1-5 stars given as choices.
7. How would you rate your first and second student teaching field experience placement based on professional growth? 1-5 stars given as choices.

8. Would you recommend that Clarion offer more field placement or observations within classrooms more throughout the teacher preparation program?
 - a. Yes
 - b. Maybe
 - c. No
9. How concerned are you about managing classroom behaviors? 1-10 scale given.
10. How concerned are you about preparing modifications and accommodations within the classroom? 1-10 scale given.
11. How concerned are you about collaborating with parents of children with disabilities? 1-10 scale given.
12. Do you feel you could teach anywhere you wished to go with the knowledge and experiences you are learning at Clarion? 1-10 scale given.

Appendix Item 5 PDSA Timeline

Months	2022				2023					
	S	O	N	D	J	F	M	A	M	J
Plan										
IRB Excusal										
Complete Committee										
Revise/Submit Final Overview										
Schedule Overview Date										
Present Overview to committee										
Study										
Conduct Pre-Intervention Survey										
Cycle 1										
Focus Interview 1										
Cycle 2										
Focus Interview 2										
Do										
Analyze Data										
Code Data (focus group)										
Draft Summary										
Act										
Consider adjustments for future iterations										
Summarize & Conclude										
Revise and Prepare DiP										
Submit final DiP to committee for review										
Schedule Defense										
Defend DiP										

Bibliography

- Billingsley, B. & Bettini, E. (October 2019). *Special education attrition and retention: A review of literature*. Review of Education Literature Volume 89, Number 5, pages 697-744.
- Bouck, E. (2005). Secondary special educators: Perspectives of preservice preparation and satisfaction. *Teacher Education and Special Education*. 28(2), 125-139.
- Butler, A. & Monda-Amaya, L. (2016). Preservice teachers' perceptions of challenging behaviors. *Teacher Education and Special Education*. 39(4), 276-292.
- Charner-Laird, M., Kirkpatrick, C., Szczesiul, S., Watson, D. & Gordon, P. (2016). From collegial support to critical dialogue: Including new teachers' voices in collaborative work. *The Professional Educator*. 40(2).
- Cornelius, K. & Nagro, S. (2014). Evaluating the evidence base of performance feedback in preservice special education teacher training. *Teacher Education and Special Education*. 37(2), 133-146.
- DeAngelis, K., Wall, A., & Che, J. (2013). The impact of preservice preparation and early career support on novice teachers' career intentions and decisions. *Journal of Teacher Education*. 64(4), 338-555.
- Dukes, C., Darling, S., & Doan, K. (2014). Selection pressures on special education teacher preparation: Issues shaping our future. *Teacher Education and Special Education*. 37(1), 9-20.
- Farrell, T. (2012). Novice-service language teacher development: Bridging the gap between preservice and in-service education and development. *Tesol Quarterly*. 46(3), 435-449.
- Love, A. (2017). *Classroom Characteristic Inventory* [Class Handout]. Clarion University of Pennsylvania, SPED 426/7.
- McCall, Z., McHatton, P., Shealey, M. (2014). Special education teacher candidate assessment: A review. *Teacher Education and Special Education*. 37(1), 51-70.
- Monnin, K., Day, J., Strimel, M., and Dye, K. (June 2021). The special education teacher shortage: A policy analysis. *Council for Exceptional Children*. Retrieved March 6, 2022 from, <https://exceptionalchildren.org/blog/why-now-perfect-time-solve-special-education-teacher-shortage>
- Pua, D., Peyton, D., Brownell, M., Contesse, V., & Jones, N. (2021) *Preservice observation in special education: A validation study*. Journal of Learning Disability. Volume 54(1) pages 6-19.

- Roberts, C., Benedict, A., & Thomas, R. (2013). Cooperating teachers' role in preparing preservice special education teachers: Moving beyond sink or swim. *Intervention in School on Disabilities*, 49(3), 174-180.
- Roegman, R., Pratt, S., Sanchez, S., & Chen, C. (2018). Between extraordinary and marginalized: Negotiating tensions in becoming special education-certified teachers. *The New Educator*, 14(4), 293-314.
- Sciuchetti, M., Roberson, P., McFarland, L., & Garcia, S. (May 2018). Preservice special education teachers' reflections on their developing professional awareness via in-context learning. *The Teacher Educator*, 53(2), 150-166.
- Tyler, T, A., & Brunner, C. C. (2014). The case for increasing workplace decision-making: Proposing a model for special educator attrition research. *Teacher Education and Special Education 2014*, Volume 37(4) pages 283-308.