

## Risk and Resilience in Beginning Special Education Teachers

**Bridget Belknap and Juliana Taymans**

The George Washington University

Special education teachers leave the field at a rate that outpaces their general education teacher counterparts, with special education teaching positions unfilled at a rate 5.5 times greater than general education positions (Boe, 2006). This study identified perceptions of risk and resilience in nine first year special education teachers in order to identify how to best support and retain them. Through semi-structured interviews the teachers described their experiences in the following roles (1) co-teaching, (2) self-contained, (3) case management, and (4) "other" (e.g., coach, tutor). Participants identified and positively or negatively ranked six "feeling" words they experienced in each role, which resulted in a portrait of risk and resilience. Results indicated that participants felt the most positive in an "other" and self-contained teaching role with less positive feelings in co-teaching and case management roles. When participants felt supported and perceived that they were making a difference, they felt the most resilient. When participants felt isolated and underprepared, they felt the least resilient. Implications for school-based supports and teacher preparation are discussed.

*Keywords:* inclusion, special education, novice teacher, teaching conditions .

On average, the teaching profession loses and must replace almost a fifth of its workforce each year (Planty et al., 2008, p. 51). Special education teachers leave the field at a higher rate than general educators, and new special education teachers (those who have taught for 1-3 years) leave at a higher rate than their veteran counterparts (Boe, 2006). Special education teachers in a large national study who reported wanting to leave the field immediately, stated that their workload was unmanageable, that they were not fully

certified, that their paperwork interfered with their ability to teach, and that they were asked to serve students in more than four disability categories (Carlson, Brauen, Klein, Schroll, & Willig, 2002). Conversely, those who indicated a desire to stay in the field said they were more likely to stay if they felt supported by their administration, their workload was manageable, and paperwork did not interfere with their teaching (Carlson et al., 2002).

The shape of special education has changed greatly over the last 20 years; the

most recent trend is toward a more inclusive service delivery model. Nearly half of all students identified as having learning disabilities spend almost 80% of their school day in general education, or co-taught classrooms (Boe, 2006, p. 148; Wasburn-Moses, 2005). Special education teachers are increasingly asked to work with students from more than one disability group and to co-teach in multiple content-area classes (Carlson et al., 2002; Wasburn-Moses, 2005). These new demands lead to special education teachers spending more time consulting with other teachers and less time delivering individualized instruction to students (Wasburn-Moses, 2005). Not only do special education teachers work with a diverse population of students in multiple classrooms, but they also frequently encounter a lack of access to resources, behavior management issues, overwhelming paperwork, and little support or collaboration with colleagues and administrators (Billingsley, 2003; Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004; Gerhke & McCoy, 2007; Griffin et al., 2009; Mastropieri, 2001; Schlichte, Yssel, & Merbler, 2005; Whitaker, 2001, 2003). These factors contribute to the relatively higher attrition rate of special educators, especially beginners, as compared to general educators (Boe, 2006).

For schools to be successful, they need teachers who are able not only to stay in their schools but to thrive in them; they need teachers who are resilient. Under a resilience model, there must be protective factors that balance out risk factors in order for resilience to occur. For special educators, risk factors related to teacher turnover include the challenges listed above, while protective factors include those things that might mitigate risk, such as a strong mentor and positive relationships with students. For many special educators, risk factors outweigh

protective factors. This is particularly true for new special educators, who are at the most risk for leaving the field (Boe, 2006).

There is some research about resilience in teachers (Beltman, Mansfield & Price, 2011). However, there is no research specifically addressing resilience in beginning special education teachers. This descriptive study provides an in-depth analysis of experiences of risk and resilience among beginning special education teachers in an effort to bridge this gap and provide insight about ways to promote or inhibit resilience in new special education teachers.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Two conceptual frameworks inform this study, Bronfenbrenner's ecological model and resilience theory.

**Ecological model.** Under the ecological model, an individual is viewed as a product of his or her ecology (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). To conceptualize this visually, an individual would be at the center of a series of emanating concentric rings ranging from the most direct to the most indirect kind of impact. A teacher is largely impacted by students, colleagues, and administrators (the "microsystem" in the ring closest to center) and is most indirectly impacted by federal policy or social norms (the "macrosystem" in the most outer ring). Individuals do not navigate life in a vacuum; a number of outside influences affect every day decisions. For new teachers it is important to examine not only their environments but their perceptions about and responses to those environments.

**Resilience theory.** Resilience theory asserts that at any given time an individual is encountering a balance of protective factors and risk factors, with risk factors comprising biological, individual, interpersonal, and

community/organizational indices that create vulnerabilities in people and protective factors mitigating the negative effects of those risks (Zautra, Hall, & Murray, 2009, p. 10). These influencing factors impact a person's life and reactions to challenges. Resilience is a "successful adaptation" to stressful events (Zautra et al., 2009, p. 4). If teachers are able to continually respond resiliently over time, they are more likely to stay in teaching and to thrive. If teachers experience more risk than resilience, they are less likely to thrive and stay. For the purposes of this study, the researchers studied how teachers experienced risk and resilience and how their professional ecology influenced those experiences.

### Research Methods

In qualitative research, the goal is to explore rather than define and to form a "complex, detailed understanding of the issue" (Creswell, 2007, p. 41). In this study, the goal was to explore how new special education teachers feel about and make meaning of their experiences across multiple teaching environments to examine risk and resilience across their multiple roles and responsibilities. The question for this study was: *How do beginning (first-year) special education teachers in secondary schools experience multiple school environments associated with their roles as teachers?*

### Summary of Methodology

Nine first-year special education teachers participated in semi-structured interviews. The interviews followed an adapted version of Harter and Monsour's (1992) "Self-in-Relationships" (SIR) interview protocol. This protocol was initially developed to examine adolescents' self-perceptions at different phases of development (Harter & Monsour, 1992).

The interview protocol asks participants to describe how they feel in different contexts of their lives, to identify whether those feelings are positive or negative, and to use a diagram to classify those feelings as most, less, or least important. Several studies have since replicated the protocol (e.g., Simonsen, 2010; Wright, 2006).

This protocol has a "positivity bias;" individuals tend to rank positive attributes as most important and negative attributes as less important. This has been interpreted "as a mechanism to protect and enhance the self, [as] individuals are more likely to emphasize and take credit for their successes than their failures" (Harter & Monsour, 1992, p. 252). In studies with different populations, results have shown that the core ring (the most important region of the diagram) has a mean distribution of higher than 75% positive traits and 10% or less negative traits (Harter & Monsour, 1992). Since resilience is associated with positive traits and risk with negative traits, this study examined the core diagram region for resilience factors and the outer region of the diagram for risk factors.

The interview protocol was adapted for this study by asking participants to use descriptive language to communicate their experiences in three different school roles, to identify those descriptors as positive or negative, and to then rank them from most important to least important by placing them on the concentric circle diagram. The three roles were made visually distinct on the diagram by using different color stickers. Once the diagram was completed, participants were asked to refer to their "self-portrait" and describe what they noticed. Then, the researcher asked participants to describe what they believed their school did to promote or inhibit the positive factors identified (resilience) and

the school role in exacerbating or minimizing the negative factors identified (risk).

### Criteria for Participant Recruitment and Selection

This was a descriptive study of first-year special education teachers enrolled in a graduate licensure program at one university. These individuals had completed their teaching internship requirements, were in full-time paid special education teaching positions, and were completing their final course requirements for graduation. The potential pool of participants was 21. All of these individuals

were contacted via e-mail and were invited to participate in the study. Once a final list of voluntary participants was identified, the researcher met with the faculty advisor familiar with participants' current work situations to choose a purposeful sample of nine teachers. The sample size is similar to previous interview studies on teacher resilience. Selection was based on ensuring that participants represented as much as possible a full range of teaching conditions (e.g., teacher demographics, school demographics, special education delivery models).

### Sample

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

Participant	Age Group	Ethnicity	Undergraduate Degree	Career Field Prior to Teaching
Harper	24-27	White	Elementary Education	Peace Corps
June	24-27	White	Education	(None identified)
Lily	24-27	White	Psychology	(None identified)
Maggie	45+	White	Education of Hearing Impaired	Tutoring
Maya	27-35	White	History/Women's Studies	Public relations, Education policy
Olivia	24-27	White	Music Therapy	Music Therapy
Scarlet	27-35	White	Political Science	Politics, Broadcasting
Simone	35-45	African American	Political Science	Nonprofit administration
Zoe	24-27	African American	Political Science	Education development

Table 2. School Data by Participant

<b>Participant</b>	<b>School Level</b>	<b>Subjects Taught by Participant</b>	<b>No. of Students on Participant's IEP caseload</b>	<b>Total No. of Students in the School</b>	<b>School Making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)*?</b>	<b>Percentage of Students Qualifying for Free and Reduced Meals</b>	<b>School Attendance Rate</b>	<b>SPED Percentage of School Population</b>
Harper	High school	All subjects	8	2010	No	35.1%	93.9%	15.40%
June	Middle school	English	10	664	No	54.7%	93.9%	14.50%
Lily	High school	Math	10	2298	No	26.2%	94%	16.90%
Maggie	Middle school	English	5	2158	No	32.9%	95%	17.40%
Maya	Middle school	English	13	828	No	57.9%	95.4%	10.80%
Olivia	High school	Music	2	2140	Yes	8.9%	96%	14.60%
Scarlet	High school	Math	7	2087	Yes	4.2%	96.1%	11.70%
Simone	Middle school	English	9	1144	Yes	22.4%	97%	13.30%
Zoe	High school	Math	16	836	No	85%	70%	21%

## **Data Collection**

Each interview was conducted in a private setting—a teacher’s classroom or a quiet room in a library—and was audio recorded. Participants were informed of the study’s purpose, assured anonymity, and informed of her right to stop the interview at any time. The interview had five distinct parts: demographics and work environment; personal perceptions in three teaching domains; self-portrait development; participant self-portrait analysis; and participant analysis of how school environments influenced the self-portrait. Interviews concluded by inviting participants to ask questions or comment.

## **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

The researcher coded transcribed interviews. The purpose of coding is “to undertake three kinds of operations: (a) noticing relevant phenomena, (b) collecting examples of those phenomena, and (c) analyzing those phenomena in order to find commonalities, differences, patterns, and structures” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, pp. 55-56). In this sense, coding was a heuristic process guided by the research question.

The researcher read each transcript and reviewed each self-portrait to analyze the data as one unit and then coded transcripts using both emergent and theoretical codes, allowing independent themes to emerge from the narratives while also viewing statements through a theoretical lens (Maxwell, 2005). Modifications to coding or analysis were noted via analytic memos to identify patterns of resilience. The ratios of positive to negative descriptors were calculated and compared.

## **Validity**

Creswell (2007, p. 206) considers “‘validation’ in qualitative research to be an attempt to assess the ‘accuracy’ of the findings”. In this study, validity was

addressed by collecting a rich bevy of data and by building in systematic checkpoints throughout the study. The researcher wrote analytic memos regularly to monitor and reflect on bias. This was done throughout the study to map researcher beliefs and assumptions that could influence the data collection and analysis phase (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). The researcher also solicited frequent feedback from peer reviewers not only to reduce researcher bias, but also to verify analysis and interpretation of the data. Percentages of positive and negative adjectives generated in each teaching domain and in each concentric ring (most, less, least important) from each participant were compared. This process not only supported the interpretive analysis, but also served as an additional data point, thereby building validity (Maxwell, 2005, p. 113). In addition, participant feedback was solicited. Participants had an opportunity to agree, disagree, or add information to increase validity measures. Four participants participated in brief follow-up interviews in the semester following data collection.

## **Findings**

Data analysis generally showed that participants felt positive in self-contained, co-teaching, and “other” roles and negative in the case management role. Themes of respect and support emerged as sources of resilience, and themes of isolation, lack of support, and lack of preparation emerged as sources of risk. Across each environment, however, participants were able to identify and demonstrate resilience.

### **Self-Contained**

Self-contained teaching occurs when students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) receive services in a classroom without the presence of general education students. Seven of the nine participants taught at least one self-

contained period per day. On the SIR, participants gave more positive responses (82%) than negative responses (18%) in the

self-contained setting (Figure 1).

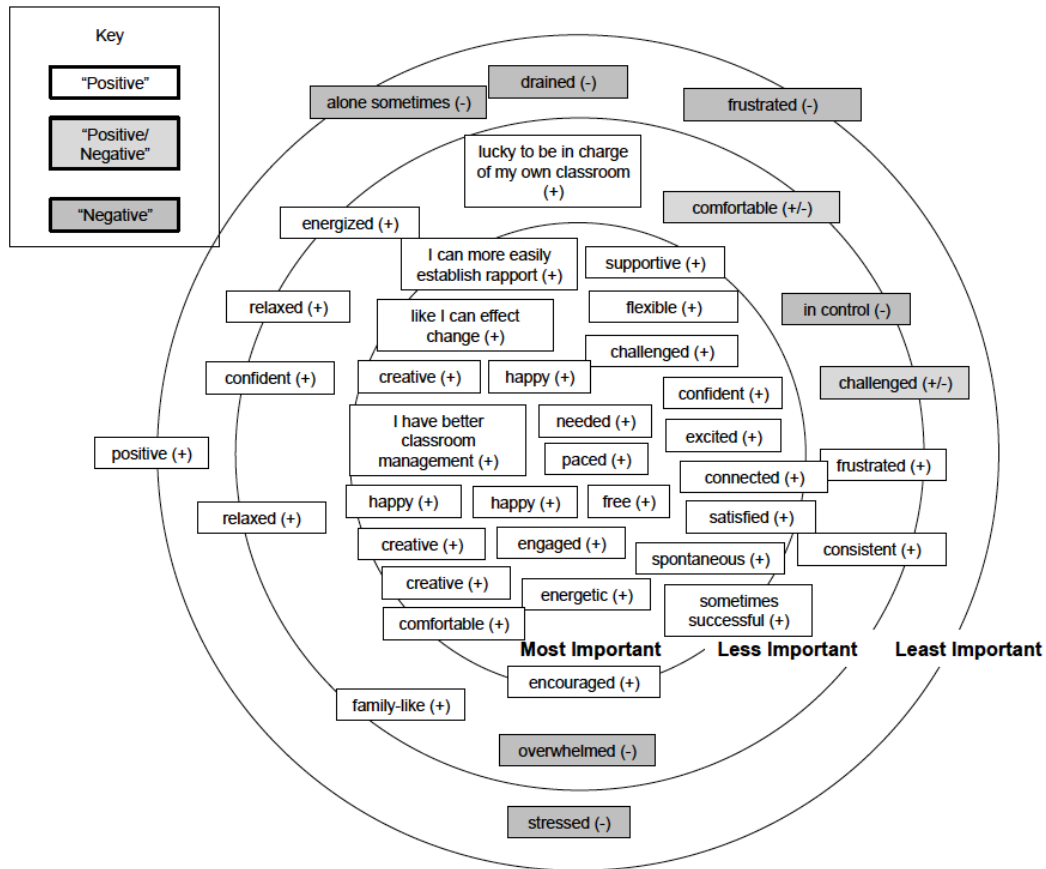


Figure 1. Combined Self-in-Relationships (SIR) Portrait for the Seven Participants (of Nine) who Experienced Self-Contained Teaching

Descriptions of ownership of their work were distinctive across participants. Feelings of confidence and control were supported by participants' positive experiences in their self-contained classrooms. They generally felt connected to their students and that they were making a difference in students' lives and growing as teachers. These feelings translated into protective factors within this particular teaching role.

While all participants had positive things to share about self-contained teaching, many also said that it was

challenging and frustrating. All but one participant identified at least one challenging aspect of teaching in this setting. The issue of balancing individual student needs with content standards and state test expectations was presented several times. In two instances, participants reflected that, while providing them with autonomy, self-contained teaching also isolated them. Thus, depending on other support structures, self-contained teaching resulted in both risk and resilience.

**Co-teaching**

Co-teaching is an instructional arrangement that supports inclusive special education practices because it precludes the need for students with disabilities to go to a separate setting to receive specialized assistance. In co-teaching, special education teachers provide support to students with disabilities within the general education classroom. There is little variation in the definition of co-teaching, but there is great variability in how it is implemented, which is

often based on the needs of the students and the skills and disposition of the co-teachers (Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, & Mcculley, 2012). Among the nine teachers who participated in this study, six co-taught, though their co-teaching arrangements varied (Table 3).

Table 3. Co-teaching Characteristics, by Participant

Participant	No. of classes co-taught	No. of co-teachers	No. of subjects taught
Maya	6	3	2
Maggie	2	2	1
Zoe	1	1	1
June	5	5	1
Simone	2	2	1
Lily	3	1	1

Table 4. Additional School-Based Roles Performed by Participants

Participant	Role
Harper	Coach
June	Mentor
Maya	Tutor
Olivia	Committee Member
Scarlet	Relationship Builder

Participants felt conflicted and described less positive experiences than with self-contained teaching (Figure 2). About 63% of responses for inclusion were ranked as “positive,” and 37% were ranked as “negative”. Within interviews, responses varied greatly from relationship to relationship. A participant who had an extremely positive experience with one co-teacher may have had an extremely negative experience with another.

A consistent theme throughout descriptions of the inclusion experience was

feeling uncertain about one’s role as a co-teacher. When describing their relationships with co-teachers, participants said they felt tentative and were often unsure whether a disagreement was legitimate or based on their novice status. One participant described a difficult relationship with a co-teacher, saying, “It makes me really upset sometimes because I don’t know how to talk with her about [a problem I see] and approach the subject ’cause she’s very strong and she also knows the curriculum. I don’t know the



curriculum yet. It's my first year." Another participant described feeling frustrated by an inability to establish a solid identity as a co-teacher because her experiences were so varied: "I think I am flexible and other

teachers are too because I'm always coming into their classroom. It's just very different in every class. [I am] frustrated frequently because it's constant changing who I need to be for each teacher."

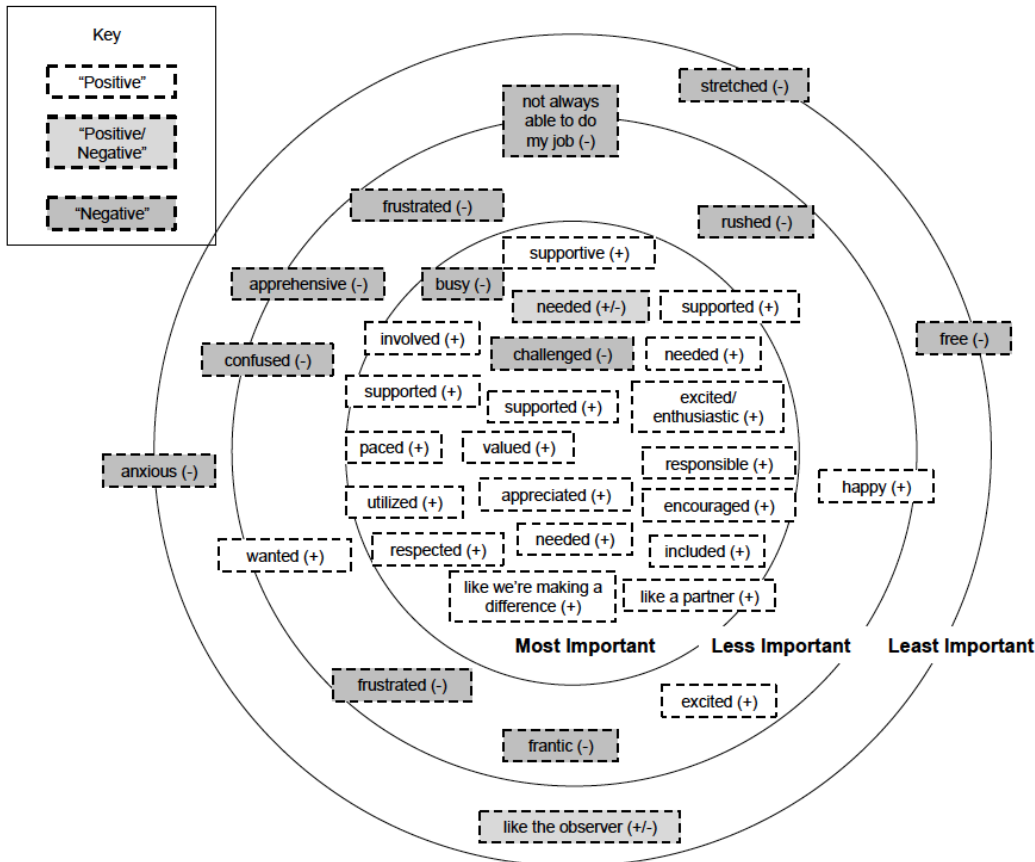


Figure 2. Combined Self-in-Relationships (SIR) Portrait for the Six Participants (of Nine) who Experienced Inclusion

Often, new teachers are teamed with veteran teachers who are considered experts. That was true among this cohort; the co-teacher with the least amount of experience had been teaching for eight years. When describing their relationships, participants said they felt tentative and were often unsure whether a disagreement was legitimate or caused by their novice status.

Participants also discussed the quality of relationships with co-teachers in terms of adequate communication and

respect. In several cases, participants said that their feelings in the classroom and how students viewed them depended largely on the tone set by their co-teacher. Participants felt good about themselves and felt more effective if they felt respected and had a sense of parity in the classroom. A distinction was made between whether participants felt like support staff (a teacher's aide, instructional assistant, or administrative assistant) or like a teaching partner. Feeling like an equal largely defined whether participants had a positive

or negative experience in a co-teaching environment.

In co-teaching, the more resilient portraits were those whose authors were able to (1) see experiences as learning opportunities, (2) cope with their co-teacher by being flexible and reflective, and (3) act as advocates for students. Regardless of whether participants enjoyed their co-teaching relationships, those who made those relationships successful were those who made one or more of these adaptations.

### **Case Management**

Special education falls under federal law and involves many regulations. This means special educators take on an additional role as a case manager. The case manager role looks different from school to school and from district to district, but it primarily means ensuring that a student's IEP is in compliance, meaning that it is (1) complete, (2) that all assessments are current, and (3) that the services outlined therein are delivered (Cheatham, Hart, Malian, & McDonald, 2012).

The teachers in this sample represent a range of case management situations. Two participants taught in small, self-contained settings where they saw the same seven or eight students each day. These students were also on their caseloads, which enabled the teachers to monitor students' services and progress. Two others had small caseloads, with only two and five students respectively. They saw these students in at least one class period. In these instances, the caseloads were kept intentionally small by the school administrators to allow these new teachers time to adjust to what can be an overwhelming and time-consuming process. The remaining participants had caseloads that ranged from 9 to 16 students. Four participants saw their students at least once

daily in class while another participant, with a caseload of sixteen, had a course schedule that was variable which meant that she may or may not see the students on her caseload in a given week.

The structure and support provided for caseload management also varied. Most teachers (seven of nine) were provided (either formally or informally) with an experienced mentor. Two teachers described being able to access individuals to answer questions, but in a much less structured and less formal setting. Some schools established protocols to help teachers gather data on the progress of their students, while other schools had no such supports. Some teachers had administrators who facilitated the first few IEP meetings in order to model the process.

Case management was the only role that applied to every participant, and it is the environment in which participants experienced the least resilience. The majority of feelings were negative (59%), indicating a non-resilient adaptation. The sources of negative feelings were lack of experience and preparation for case management, lack of time for case management during the school day, and lack of payoff for the time spent, meaning that case management duties did not always seem to result in meaningful outcomes for students while taking teacher time away from other work with students. Case management frustrations were connected to feelings of isolation and lack of appreciation for the time it takes a new teacher to learn the ins and outs of case management. Not feeling understood or appreciated connected to participants' feelings of futility or a lack of visible purpose for case management responsibilities.

Although case management was a largely negative experience, some

participants described procedures they had developed to make case management organized and manageable. Participants who described the least negative experience were those who had the most formal supports in their schools like

administrators who modeled the IEP process and support personnel to help with meeting scheduling and data management. Case management in these teachers' first year of teaching was the most challenging role.

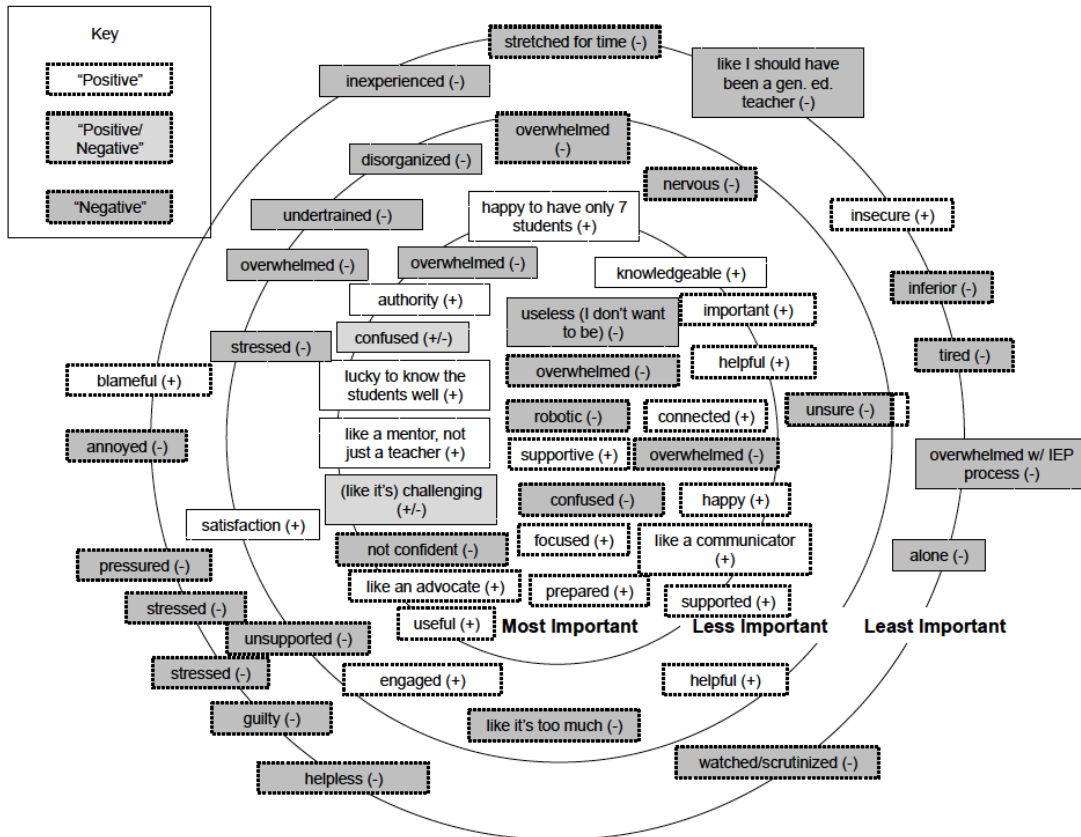


Figure 3. Combined Self-in-Relationships (SIR) Portrait for the Nine Participants (of Nine) who Experienced Case Management

**Additional (“Other”) Roles**

Participants were asked to choose three roles from a given list of four that applied to their teaching situation: co-teaching, self-contained, case management, and “other.” Five participants did all of their teaching exclusively in an inclusion or self-contained setting. Each of these five participants identified additional roles they played in their schools. These are roles for which they received no compensation, and they named the roles themselves (Table 4).

Three worked one-on-one with students informally in a tutoring or mentoring context, and the other two took on more formal school-based roles such as serving on a committee or helping to coach an after-school sport. All five took on these roles to further support and advocate for their students. In these roles, they felt that they were able to make a difference in students’ lives, sometimes an even greater difference than in an official teaching capacity. These roles were described very

positively. Participants gave 84% positive responses and 16% negative responses. All participants, particularly the three who worked one-on-one with students, expressed how happy they were to be able to connect with students and develop relationships. The negative responses dealt almost entirely with feeling tired. Two of five respondents described this “other” role as the role in which they feel “like a teacher.”

The purpose of including the “other” role was to give participants an opportunity to tell the full story and give a full picture of their identities as new teachers. Their responses were an important source of

resilience data. As participants described these roles, it became clear that the roles themselves represent resilient adaptations. All participants described being frustrated or anxious at some point throughout their teaching day. Because teaching in special education can be physically, emotionally, and mentally exhausting, it is not surprising that these emotions were evident in their responses. Yet participants’ additional roles, particularly those of mentor and tutor, served as protective factors to balance the frustrating aspects of these teachers’ jobs. Seeking such roles shows resilience on the part of participants.

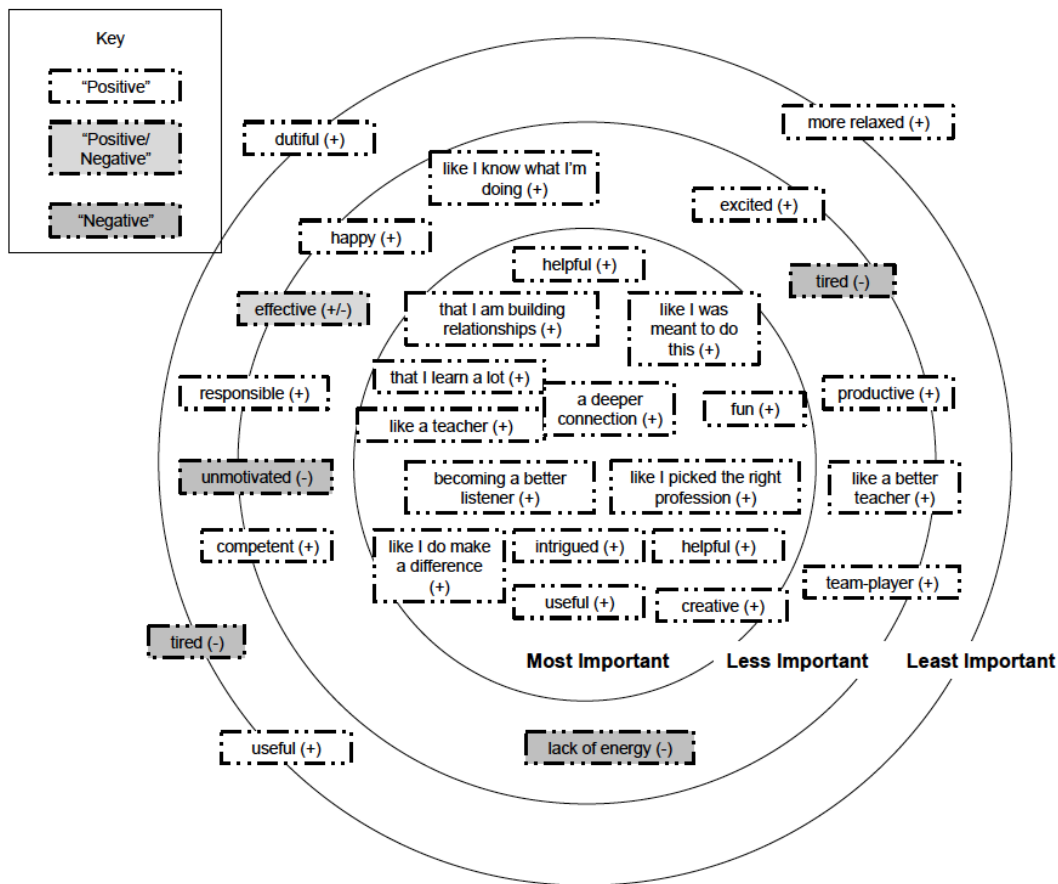


Figure 4. Combined Self-in-Relationships Portrait for the Five Participants (of Nine) who Experienced an “Other” Role

## **Participant Observations of Portraits**

### **Overall**

At the conclusion of each interview, participants were asked to look at their portrait as a complete image and to describe what they noticed.

**Resilience.** Participants noticed that their positive responses tended to be clustered in the center ring of their portraits. When asked what they thought that meant, they generally responded that their positive feelings were most important to them and that when they looked at the center ring, they saw characteristics they perceived as belonging to good teachers, things that made them feel good, or things that made them feel connected to the people around them. These core pieces contributed to their resilience.

**Risk.** Participants tended to minimize feelings in the outer ring as unimportant because they were feelings the participants did not like, viewed as temporary, or had to do only with themselves. While negative feelings themselves can be perceived as risks, the manner in which participants minimized their importance can be seen as protective.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to gain more in-depth insight into the experiences of beginning special education teachers in order to identify risk and resilience factors. Generally, results revealed that when teachers felt supported and connected, they felt more resilient; and conversely, less support and isolation promoted risk.

### **Special Education Teachers**

Special education teachers face unique challenges. They complete a wide range of tasks across a spectrum of responsibilities. These first-year teachers grappled with finding the time and ability to

address their responsibilities across an array of environments. This is particularly evident in their conversations about case management. Unlike general education teachers, special educators are case managers, spending time completing administrative or organizational tasks, a fact that is frequently cited as a reason for leaving the field (Fore, Martin, & Bender, 2002; Kaff, 2004). Even the most positive participants described feeling stretched thin.

### **Risk, Resilience, and School Ecology**

A beginning special education teacher experiences a unique professional ecology. There are specific roles that a special education teacher plays (microsystem), and those roles adjust and interact based on the greater school climate (mesosystem). Federal and local education policies and teacher preparation programs also impact the teacher's professional context (exosystem). Attitudes, beliefs, and values regarding accountability and disability also color the landscape at a more indirect level (macrosystem). The most immediate layer of influence originates in a teacher's microsystems: those day-to-day roles and responsibilities that come with the job. This study focused on four microsystems: self-contained teaching, co-teaching teaching, case management, and "other" roles that new teachers play. In each microsystem, participants encountered risk and resilience.

**Self-contained teaching: risk and resilience.** Isolation was the most common risk factor associated with self-contained teaching. Some participants felt that teaching alone for extended periods of time disconnected them from the rest of the school and from their colleagues. It could also be overwhelming to feel responsible for meeting the needs of many different children without support. Alternately,

sources of resilience in self-contained teaching included having more control over classroom decisions, more room for creativity, and more opportunities to get to know students and their unique needs. Administrators and school climate can affect whether teachers experience more risk or resilience in this area, indicating that small efforts such as walking by a teacher's classroom to check in on them or inviting special education teachers to content-area staff meetings can bolster resilience in staff.

It is also noteworthy that the teachers who taught exclusively self-contained classes were those who taught students with the most significant disabilities. Teachers reflected not only on their own isolation but that of their students. Again, administrators can mitigate this risk by increasing opportunities for collaboration among teachers, partnerships, and shared activities for students.

**Co-teaching: risk and resilience.** Participants in this teaching role had mixed experiences, some positive and some negative. In both scenarios, participants cited their co-teacher and the co-teacher's attitudes about teaching and inclusion as the source of their feelings. In negative or risk situations, participants felt that their co-teacher did not listen to them and held views that conflicted with their own on how to approach teaching, collaboration, and children with IEPs. In positive situations, those with the most protective factors, participants felt supported and saw co-teachers as mentors and models. As indicated by previous research (e.g., Carlson et al., 2002) the quality of the professional relationship determined whether participants felt resilient in this microsystem. Administrators and special education coordinators influence the quality of co-teaching by carefully (or not carefully) selecting co-teaching partners

and by providing professional development for these relationships (Solis et al., 2012).

**Case management: risk and resilience.** Case management is the microsystem in which participants experienced more risk than resilience. Participants were overwhelmed and felt they did not have enough training or support to perform this role well. However, several participants were able to make a resilient adaptation by recognizing that these feelings would abate with time and experience. The participants who had the most positive (or, least negative) experiences with case management were those who had a mentor or colleague who could answer questions and those whose schools were organized in such a way that the participant was not required to do all the administrative tasks involved in case management. Administrators can reduce risk by providing formal guidance and professional development and by delegating tasks.

### **Special Education Teacher Mesosystems**

Teacher microsystems interact to represent the overall school climate. The mesosystem is particularly important in this study because it was the most variable across the sample and played the most significant role whether participants felt resilient overall in their teaching positions. It is also the level of ecology that is the most easily compared with that of other teachers, special education or not. In this study, the mesosystem is most clearly observed when participants describe what they notice when they look at their SIR portraits as a whole.

The literature on teacher resilience points to four areas common to resilient teachers (1) a calling to the profession; (2) a sense of control and agency in the classroom; (3) an active support network; and (4) strong relationships with students

and their learning (Brunetti, 2006; Gu & Day, 2007; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Kilgallon et al., 2008; Patterson et al., 2004; Stanford, 2001; Sumsion, 2004; Williams, 2003). These four themes all emerged in participant interviews, either as active findings (something participants experienced) or as passive findings (something participants wanted to experience). Ultimately, the themes that were the most prevalent in this study were participants' desire to make a difference and their desire to be supported and to feel connected to their school communities. School mesosystems had a great deal of influence over whether participants experienced these feelings or not.

**Do I make a difference?** The literature on teacher resilience tells us that resilient teachers feel a calling or have what some describe as a spiritual connection to their craft and they also have a strong sense of agency and control in their classrooms (Brunetti, 2001, 2006; Gu & Day, 2007; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Patterson et al., 2004; Sumsion, 2004; Williams, 2003). The participants in this study identified many reasons for entering teaching. Although none used the term "spiritual connection," they did say they came to teaching to make a difference in children's lives. They felt connected to teaching on a deeper personal level. These participants also felt the most resilient when they felt the most agency. This is particularly evident in the self-contained teaching role.

Conversely, participants felt the least resilient when they felt they were not able to make a difference or were inhibited from being the teacher they wanted to be. They compensated for these feelings, by being flexible and adaptive, and by recognizing that many of their negative feelings were temporary and would change with experience.

**Do I feel like I am a part of something?** Studies of teacher resilience have found that resilient teachers tend to have strong support networks and positive relationships with students (Brunetti, 2001, 2006; Gu & Day, 2007; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Kilgallon et al., 2008; Patterson et al., 2004; Stanford, 2001; Sumsion, 2004; Williams, 2003). This study underscores these findings and provides particular insight on the importance of support networks. Having a mentor (formal or informal) or supportive colleagues made a large difference in whether participants felt resilient across microsystems. Participants who felt more supported tended to have more positive experiences overall, while those who did not feel supported tended to have more negative experiences. Participants who felt connected to students tended to have more positive experiences overall.

### **Special Education Teacher Exosystem and Macrosystem**

The exosystem for new special education teachers comprises many factors, but those that are prominent in this study are school accountability policies, special education policies, and teacher preparation. The macrosystem—which consists of beliefs about disability, education reform, and teacher education—informs the policies and coursework that make up the exosystem. The combined impact of the exosystem and macrosystem is most acutely felt when participants experience role conflict and ambiguity in their work.

**Role conflict and ambiguity.** New special education teachers struggle with role conflict and role ambiguity (Wasburn-Moses, 2005). In role conflict, expectations do not match reality. This was a major issue for participants in this study who were in a teacher preparation program that equipped them to plan lessons and design curricular

interventions. As they began in their new positions, however, many discovered that their primary responsibility was not to teach but to manage or coordinate services to ensure that student IEP requirements were met. This mismatch between preparation and the current reality of the education system stems partially from a changing policy environment. Classrooms are becoming more inclusive (as opposed to self-contained) and more standards-driven. Students are increasingly expected to participate in and pass state assessments, which means teachers are increasingly expected to teach in a way that aligns with those assessments.

Role conflict and ambiguity are risk factors and inhibit resilience. All participants expressed concern or frustration with role conflict and ambiguity. While schools do not have control over federal policy, they can mitigate role conflict or ambiguity by clearly assigning responsibilities, defining those responsibilities, and providing professional development in areas of need. Something as basic as offering a series of workshops on how to write IEP goals and run IEP meetings would mediate many participant concerns. Generally, schools and teacher preparation programs need to be more transparent about the current landscape of special education so that beginning teachers are better prepared for the school ecologies they enter.

### **Recommendations for Research**

This study bridges a gap in the current literature on special education teachers and resilience, but it is only a first step into understanding their experiences. Further research is needed to add dimension, breadth, and depth to this area of study. This study is descriptive and identifies areas of risk and resilience in new special education teachers. To explore how

areas of risk differ across varied populations of teachers, future studies should include a comparison group. This methodology should be replicated with new special education teachers and veteran special education teachers; and with new special education teachers and new general education teachers. Such studies would improve generalizability and build a more nuanced picture of how different kinds of teachers at different phases of their careers experience risk and resilience.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

**New special education teachers must be supported.** Formally or informally, special education teachers need to feel supported in their first year of teaching across their varied roles and responsibilities since feelings of isolation are particularly damaging. Schools should offer induction support for new special education teachers to help them negotiate their responsibilities (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008; Sindelar, Brownell, & Billingsley, 2010). This support can take the form of a formal mentor, an informal coach, new teacher support, or networking groups. Resilient teachers will find support for themselves, but schools can facilitate resilience and promote connectedness by offering formal support opportunities.

**All teachers can benefit from learning about inclusion.** Schools increasingly offer co-teaching as a special education service delivery model. This must be addressed in teacher preparation programs and in K-12 schools. Teacher preparation programs can instruct pre-service teachers in how to design and implement instruction collaboratively. Schools can plan for inclusion by designing master schedules to build in time for co-teachers to plan together. Co-teachers should be selected not only based on availability or the quality of their teaching,



but also consider their willingness to co-teach and attitudes toward students with disabilities.

**New special education teachers must feel like they make a difference.** A primary risk factor for new special education teachers is being unable to connect with students. Participants in this study highlight case management as a major barrier to connecting with students. There are several ways that schools can reduce this barrier. New special education teachers should have small caseloads of students whom they also teach. It would allow them the time to learn how to case manage effectively while allowing time to learn about their students. Providing administrative support in the form managing IEP files, tracking deadlines, gathering information, and scheduling meetings would allow the new teacher to focus on developing meaningful IEPs.

**New special education teachers must be taught how to be a case manager.** Teacher preparation programs and school systems need to teach novice teachers about case management. Participants here and in many studies in the literature discuss how much time they spend working on case management and how negative their experiences are with it. Participants in this study had negative feelings about case management largely because they felt unprepared and unsure about their responsibilities. They wanted to do it right

but did not know how. To better prepare teaching candidates, teacher preparation programs could offer a course or module that specifically addresses the work expected of special education teachers when they are assigned a caseload of students. Additionally, K-12 school systems could offer professional development either formally for the entire department or informally via a mentor or coach to review specific expectations and procedures for effective case management.

### Conclusion

Every effort must be made to keep strong teachers in the field. This study revealed that there are protective factors that new special education teachers experience that make them feel resilient. Schools facilitate resilience by creating opportunities for teachers to build relationships with one another and by providing administrative support for new teachers. The more schools do to support new special education teachers, and the more teacher preparation programs do to prepare new special education teachers for the current realities of teaching, and the more new special education teachers do to be consistently adaptive and reflective, the better the chances are that these teachers will thrive resiliently in their careers.

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