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The Journey Towards Educational Equity

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THE JOURNEY TOWARDS EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

by

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ABSTRACT

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by

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This single case, qualitative study takes a critical lens in examining the creation of educational equity for students labeled with a dis/ability. Research has shown a detrimental effect of inequities among historically marginalized students for over 50 years, both from an academic lens as well as societal impact. For this research, one site, identified as utilizing Integrated Comprehensive Systems (ICS) for Equity as their approach, was studied. ICS for Equity is an approach to providing services to students within the school setting regardless of the presence (or absence) of a label, allowing for academic success in heterogeneous learning environments, versus segregated programs.

The main research questions guiding this study asked teachers and administrators, from a district having success implementing an inclusive education model, how they conceptualize students labeled with a dis/ability, and what effect this has had on their practice as educators? Interviews were the primary source of data, supported by a review of documentation used within the organization. Both sources of data were coded to identify themes. One school district was identified for participation. Within this study all teachers that have been a part of the district for more than one year were invited to participate, as well as administrators that were directly connected to a school.

A thematic analysis of the collected data resulted in five themes. The first theme indicated that early experiences with persons with a dis/ability had an impact on their beliefs as an educator, more so than their professional experiences. The second theme identified proportional representation of students with a dis/ability in general education classrooms, with all teachers assuming responsibility for their instruction. The third theme found that despite a high frequency of person-first language, variability in the words used to describe students with a dis/ability remained. The fourth theme uncovered the use of coaching and collaborative practices to help maintain equitable education, and the final theme indicated that there were a continuum of strategies used to educate students with a dis/ability. These findings provide practical implications for educators seeking to disrupt inequities for children with dis/abilities, enabling them to take steps to ensure that all children have the opportunity to experience educational equity.

For my daughter Georgia, you fuel my desire to make this world a place of acceptance.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My professional career has been a journey of discovery and growth and there have been so many that have challenged and supported me in becoming an educational leader that strives for equity. For Dr. Moeser, who believed in me, to Dr. Means, who took a chance on me, and to Dr. Joynt, who encourages me; thank you. Throughout this process I have been fortunate to work with amazing chairs and committee members, and I am grateful for their presence in this journey. Drs. Sandy, Bartlett, Farmer-Hinton, Erenberger, Frattura, and Whiteman; thank you. To all my Wildcats, tall and small, you motivate me to show up every day and work to ensure that every child has any opportunity they desire, now and in their future. I am so thankful to be a part of the Wilson community. And of course, my friends and my tribe, I am so blessed to have each of you in my life. Thank you for your ongoing support and encouragement.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Inequity among historically marginalized groups of individuals has remained one of the most talked about educational issues to date, having been recognized in United States' school systems for well over 50 years (Ladson-Billings, 2006). For reasons delineated in much of the research, disproportionate educational success has been found to play a significant role in affecting graduation rates, college attendance and employment (Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Annamma, Morrison, & Jackson, 2014; Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010; Brooks, 2012; Farkas, 2011; Gregory, Skiba, & Mediratta, 2017; Morgan, Frisco, Farkas, & Hibel, 2010; Murphy, 2009; Pitre, 2014; Stainback & Stainback, 1996). Although a variety of explanations for this disparity in achievement scores between student groups have been offered over the years, including access to rigorous course work, low ability grouping, and the overall inadequacies of separate programs (Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Garcia, & Nolly, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Noguera, 2019; Skrla, Scheurich; Snell & Drake, 1994; Villa & Thousand, 1992), educators have made insufficiently slow progress in resolving said disparities (Camera, 2016). In fact, despite improvements shown in scores for African-American and Hispanic students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), one measure used by the federal government to monitor student advancement, groups such as English Learners, children with dis/abilities and students of color maintain scores that trail their counterparts by an average greater than 20 points, equating to approximately two grade levels (Ansell, 2011; Boykin & Noguera, 2001; Pitre, 2016).

Overall outcomes of education chronicle positive links between schooling and health status, consumer choices, fertility choices, and the preparation of one's offspring (Brooks, 2012; Wolfe & Haveman, 2001). Wolfe and Haveman (2001) also note the presence of

"intergenerational effects of schooling" (p. 3) to have both direct and indirect influences on a family, presenting long-term impacts of educational success on an individual's children and grandchildren (often omitted in the study of educational influences). Educational success has also been found to correspond with other areas of life, including the making (or perhaps availability) of housing choices, the level of schooling attained, non-marital childbearing status and even participation in criminal activities (Annamma et al., 2014; Groenke, 2010; Kayshal et al., 2011). There is also a reported fear that "the gap in achievement has shifted steadily from being an indicator of educational inequality to being a direct cause of socioeconomic inequality" (Harris & Herrington, 2006, p. 210), and the result of on-going segregation is that many children are unprepared to successfully participate in an increasingly diverse society (Noguera, 2019). Post-secondary education in the United States is a key factor in upward mobility, and without adequate K-12 school experiences, an individual's options are limited (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Kozol, 1992).

Merriam-Webster (2020) defines equity as "justice according to natural law or right specifically: freedom from bias or favoritism" (n.p.). Educational equity not only values the diversity of individuals, but it also focuses on providing access to educational opportunities for all children (Capper & Frattura, 2009; Frattura & Capper, 2007; Theoharris, 2009; Waitoller, 2020). It is about creating a learning environment for all, "rather than providing accommodations and modifications to a normative curriculum" (Waitoller, 2020, p. 4) that may allow a child to engage with the curriculum. For this study, the concept of educational equity is grounded in the discrepancies between students of differing racial ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds (Annamma et al., 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Stainback & Smith, 2005), however it has since expanded to include areas such as language abilities, sexual orientation, gender, and ableism.

Even though existing research predominately concentrates on discrepancies between children of color and their white counterparts, another learning interval increasing in regularity in data analysis (yet rarely included in equity discussions) occurs between children with and without an identified dis/ability; the distinction of the spelling of dis/ability in this manner is to recognize the perceived ableism as a result of the social construct of an individual's ability. The notion used throughout this paper of dis/ability acknowledges ableism as a product of social and cultural practices, and recognizes that individuals labeled as such have been deemed so as a result of a process for determining qualification for specific services. Achievement levels for children with an identified dis/ability have historically been significantly below peers, and despite people having been identified and labeled with dis/abilities for centuries, they were generally overlooked in the school setting all together until the rapid evolution of special education services throughout the 20th century (Friend & Bursuck, 1999; Kauffman et al., 2018; Stainback & Smith, 2005).

The nationwide count of students qualifying to receive special education services, as a result of meeting eligibility criteria, has varied over the years, and a more recent upswing since the 2011-2012 school year (Samuels, 2016) has indicated nearly 14% of public-school pupils being identified with some form of a dis/ability (Feng & Sass, 2013). The past ten years show an increase of 165% in the number of students classified as having autism, and an increase of 51% for those with "other health impairments" (Samuels, 2016). The dis/ability area of "specific learning disability" continues to make up the largest group despite a decrease from 45% to 39% for children receiving services in this area (Ehrhardt et al., 2013; Samuels, 2016), and the percentage of children identified with an intellectual dis/ability is 6% (NCES, 2019). Standardized assessments show students labeled with a dis/ability often score more than one

standard deviation below their peers (without dis/abilities) in Grades 4, 8 and 12 for the area of reading, with even greater gaps occurring in mathematics (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, 2014). These data, when coupled with research links between income and class status to educational success, are especially troubling (Reardon, 2011). Educational equity is about more than simple individual achievement; it embodies opportunities presented within the school system, as well as life, such as access and high expectations for each person (Noguera, 2019; Walker, 2019)

Kauffman (2007) describes the progression of education through the lens of two systems; legal and medical. He goes on to explain the belief that, while general education was primarily from the rule of law, "special education was guided in its origins primarily by physicians" (Kauffmann, 2007, p. 243), reinforced by the requirement of medical categorization for eligibility purposes, as outlined in the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA) (Triano, 2000). In this model a child is "diagnosed as fitting into one of several predetermined medical categories" (Triano, 2000, p. 2), with an impairment being deemed the cause of educational difficulties, and special education being the cure (Cologon, 2016; Hehir, 2007; Kauffman & Hallahan, 1974; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996; Reid & Valle, 2004; Triano, 2000). It is possible that this model developed due to initial attempts (at educating those with intellectual dis/abilities) being completed by physicians, who had previously observed success working with individuals with physical dis/abilities (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). What the medicalized framing of special education did not (and does not) consider is the racialized connections to identifying and servicing children of differing abilities (Annamma, 2014).

Despite an origin in medicine, some have argued that dis/abilities are socially produced, and that "one is not necessarily disabled merely because one has an impairment" (Connor et al.,

2016, p. 203); however, they maintain that constructs of dis/ability now dominate institutions such as public education (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011; Andrews et al., 2000; Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Connor, 2012; Oliver, 1992). Dis/ability advocates, as well as those that subscribe to a critical dis/ability theory, assert that society has been designed with an ideology of normal, resulting from the assumption that all people meet a certain desired state (e.g. white, able, middle class) (Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Reid & Valle, 2004; Rocco, 2005; Wendell, 1996). As such, individuals that fall outside of these expectations do not fit the norm, therefore recognizing the problem as one within the person. The model of servicing students who deviate from socially constructed norms, previously known as the medical model of special education, includes labeling and placement of students in separate schools, programs, and classrooms (Frattura & Topinka, 2006; Theoharris, 2009). The foundation of special education services being that children with dis/abilities have deficits requiring a "unique body of knowledge and from smaller classes staffed by specially trained teachers using special materials." (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987, p. 375). Will (1986) states, "although well-intentioned, this so-called 'pull-out' approach to the educational difficulties of students with learning problems has failed in many instances to meet the educational needs of these students and has created, however unwittingly, barriers to their successful education" (p. 412). This belief has dominated the world of education for decades, resulting in a system deemed segregated and second class (Frattura & Capper, 2007; Gartner & Lipsky, 1987; Gorsky & Pothini, 2018; Smith et al., 2017).

The examination of achievement gap research through a lens of *opportunity* gaps has been a vital step in progressive educational change, shifting the emphasis from an individual's abilities to affording a critical view of school privileges presented to children, and the impact those privileges have on their education (Darling-Hammond, 2009; Milner, 2012). Boykin and

Noguera (2011) state, “Opportunity gaps are perpetuated by two related aspects of inequality: inequalities that are directly related to children’s backgrounds and school practices that reinforce and often exacerbate inequity” (p. 186), whereas Royal (2012) calls the terminology of achievement gap “inaccurate because it blames the historically marginalized, under-served victims of poor schooling and holds whiteness and wealth as models of excellence” (n.p.).

The framing of opportunity gap indicates that discrepancies in academic performance stem from social constructs and how people respond to them, not solely the biological ability of the individual (Connor et al., 2016; Mooney, 2018; Tate, 2012). In other words, social barriers against those who vary more than a certain degree from what has been deemed normal, by societal expectations, have been created and accepted (Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Back et al., 2016; Baynton, 2001), and some also feel that “more than any other institution, schools are charged with making equality of opportunity a reality” (Duncan & Murnane, 2014, p. 11). Although the influence of families and access to resources a child has while growing up is one component to opportunity gaps, school systems contribute to the already existing inequities, and a critical dis/ability lens would further ask if it is even appropriate to utilize standardized assessments as a measure of success (Hosking, 2008). Johnson and Uline (2005) note that it is essential for schools to utilize research and seek out approaches to ensure equitable educational experiences are provided, so that all children are able to develop the skills necessary to find success in the “economic, social, political and intellectual life of their communities” (p. 45). To avoid widening the gap in state-sanctioned knowledge and exposure to grade level content, these approaches must be based in research and delivered in ways that expose students to the same standards and skills as their peers. Schools must apply equity-focused strategies to ensure all students receive a high-quality education.

The design of structural and systemic configuration, allowing for equitable distribution of resources and proportional representation within a school and classroom, is a critical component of ensuring high-quality instruction (Capper & Frattura, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2009; Groenke, 2010). Effective schools research has identified characteristics of schools that achieve both quality and equity include high expectations, an acceptance of responsibility for student learning, and instructional leadership that incorporates frequent monitoring of student progress (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Gartner & Lipsky, 1987; Theoharris, 2009). Murphy (2009) states, "The reality is that equity must be determined one student at a time" (p. 11), for no two dis/abilities are the same and can also be "mediated by other social identities, such as race, social class, sexuality, and gender" (Connor et al., 2016, p. 203). By avoiding overgeneralizing, the application of strategies, and grouping students with particular demographics, informed educators provide pupils access to higher instructional quality (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Murphy, 2009; Schmidt et al., 2015). One of the ways this is done is through creation of environments that allow students to grow alongside their classmates, regardless of race, ability, gender or ethnicity (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012; Frattura & Capper, 2007; Smith et al., 2017; Thousand & Villa, 1988). Such environments welcome students and provide the proactive supports needed to find success among peers, versus programs that separate students from peers thereby creating "subtle and inequitable gaps in opportunity" (Wolter, 2016, p. 31) through fragmented instruction and skills taught in isolation (Wolter, 2017).

Although such educational environments sound like a reasonable expectation, these structures are not guaranteed in all school settings. More specifically, when examining educational practices provided for students with a dis/ability, research has shown such children are often separated from their peers and receive instruction outside the general classroom, which

can stigmatize students and cause lower expectations for them (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012; Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Leinhardt & Pallay, 1982; Smith et al., 2017). The impetus of separation is based on a misperception that students who have fallen academically behind their peers need to be taught in isolation; the belief being that their understanding only can be met in segregated circumstances and only when students are caught up can they be taught alongside their peers.

Despite current practices incorporating separation, exercises designed to promote equitable practices, may in fact be superior to addressing academic instruction, as well as the social separation of students from their peers (Friend & Bursuck, 1999; McLeskey et al., 2012; Simonsen et al., 2010; Villa & Thousand, 2005; Wang & Reynolds, 1996; Wolter, 2017). Institutional definitions of "inclusion" have varied widely, particularly over the past thirty years. The U.S. government legislated the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965, with provisions designated to address skill gaps in reading and math between children, and "level the playing field and expand educational opportunity for poor children and children of color" (Hewitt, 2011, p. 169). One of these regulations, Title III, mandated special education programming and related services be delivered in isolated areas, although it did not provide federal funding for specific services across the country until the mid-70s.

In 1970, the passage of the Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA)—requiring federal monies be supplemented, not supplanted—allotted general education funds to be identified as supporting children with dis/abilities (Martin et al., 1996). This ensured districts were utilizing federal funds to enhance current programming, in addition to designating the appropriate supports from their own budgets. It was through Public Law (PL) 94-142, which came about in 1975, that Title funds benefitting students with a dis/ability were designated, albeit to a small

population of children attending state-operated schools (Martin et al., 1996). Children with dis/abilities, previously placed in alternative locations or left unsupported in public schools were now offered access as a result of the federal funds coming through PL 94-142.

Numerous changes to ESEA and EHA have been enacted throughout the years, perhaps most notably the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), which expanded testing requirements and school accountability (Robelsen, 2005). Critics of NCLB, the eighth reauthorization of ESEA, contend its directives forced schools to adopt a "one size fits all" system model (Weaver, 2006), making it difficult for individual student needs to be met. Proponents of NCLB however, argue that it has ensured accountability for previously neglected student groups (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Mooney & Gunter, 2004; Simpson et al., 2004).

Historically, and with varying degrees of success, educators have implemented structures to place children with and without dis/abilities in the same classroom (Edmonds & Spradlin, 2010; Leithwood, 2010; Morgan et al., 2010; Odom et al., 1999; Suter & Giangreco, 2009; Walsh, 2012). As early as the 1970s, proposals such as mainstreaming, the regular education initiative, and integration were attempted. It was not until the 1990s that implementation of "full inclusion" –that is, the participation of children with significant dis/abilities within natural environments or those akin to their peers—become more commonplace (Division for Early Childhood, 1993; The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps, 1988). Currently, a host of models and organizational structures that utilize inclusionary practices exist. In spite of the legislature supporting the inclusion of students in regular education settings, many district policies and practices have barred children access to services (Friend et al., 2010; Odom et al., 1999; Villa & Thousand, 2005). Advocates of inclusion believe that removing children from general education settings accentuates and devalues their differences, disrupts their learning, and

teaches them to be dependent on others (Friend & Bursuck, 1999). Just as it is critical to examine instructional practices with the intended student in mind, it is beneficial to view inclusion from an individual perspective, presuming positive intent, and recognize the benefits for all learners (Kluth, 2003), as long as those administering the practice are flexible and creative.

The long-term impacts that opportunity gaps have on the personal success of individuals, both from an educational and financial equity standpoint, are clear and educators must remain focused on making changes that benefit students facing inequities in the school environment. Simply put, opportunity gaps are a moral imperative that cannot be ignored. When coupled with increasing accountability that district, schools and teachers face from state and federal mandates, opportunity gaps must be addressed and eliminated in order to create educational equity and a more socially just society. As such, the intent of this research is to explore the effectiveness of pedagogical planning, collaboration, and instructional delivery for students with a dis/ability, who have been recognized as having the aforementioned gaps.

Problem Statement and Study Purpose

Having recognized the longstanding, negative impact that results from reduced academic success, educators continue to seek out and study practices and policies to address inequities or opportunity gaps within the school system. The purpose of this research is to document and analyze one school's experience striving towards educational equity, specifically for students with a dis/ability, and to identify its placement in the evolution of work being done to tackle issues of inequity within the public-school system. The primary focus of this study is to describe one school's approach to a more equitable approach to education for all.

Research Questions

Close examination of collaborative structures, instructional strategies, and resources will provide clarity to current and future leaders, enabling them to deliver more equitable opportunities and education for students with a dis/ability. One district, the focus of this research, has identified success in closing gaps of instructional opportunities and academic success, measured through standardized assessments, as a direct focus on educational equity for students with a dis/ability. Careful study of its planning and practices can have a positive impact on other schools struggling to close gaps in educational equity. The primary research question this study asks is:

> How do teachers and administrators, in a district having success implementing an inclusive education model conceptualize students with dis/abilities, and what effect does this have on their practice as educators? Including:
>
> a. How are students placed into classrooms, in order to educate students with dis/abilities?
> b. How do teachers collaborate, in order to educate students with dis/abilities?
> c. What resources, supports, and strategies do teachers employ, in order to educate students with dis/abilities?

Significance of the Study

Many of the challenges surrounding gaps in educational equity that currently exist in United States' public education system are deeply rooted in history, dating back to early 1900s when compulsory education was first implemented. Students have been, and continue to be, measured against a preconceived idea of what is deemed 'normal' (Connor et al., 2016). The cause of failures within the school setting has historically been placed on how the child

does/does not respond to instruction, as opposed to evaluating the overall system (Capper & Frattura, 2009; Frattura & Capper, 2007), and as a result schools have instituted programs to bridge the gap between student performance and expectations. Despite these steps, opportunity gaps between student groups have remained pervasive, and inequities in society persist. Beyond this, the issue of disproportionality within special education has grown and there continues to be an over-identification of students of color and poverty (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Connor et al., 2016; Miles, 2016; Royal, 2012; Skiba et al., 2016). Simply put, if the cycle of marginalization is to be disrupted, the system needs to change. It must focus on the assets of each student and allow for proactive educational approaches, resulting from identity-relevant instruction and high expectations. As someone who has worked in the field of education for over 20 years I have had the opportunity to work alongside hundreds of passionate people who care deeply for the students they serve. Despite this passion data continues to show marginalized students not finding the same level of academic success as their peers, and I must ask, what are the future consequences of this? How is this data connected to the work that we do each day, and the assumptions that we hold for the children we are serving? More importantly, how do we change it?

Although reasons for the ongoing gaps are unclear, there may be an underlying assumption that current laws protect and ensure access and participation in meaningful school activities for those with a dis/ability (Fisher & Frey, 2016). In fact, section 300.116 of the federal regulations states that when determining the placement of student with a dis/ability, schools must ensure the following:

1. Unless the IEP of a child with a dis/ability requires some other arrangement, the child is educated in the school that he or she would attend if nondis/abled;

2. In selecting the LRE, consideration is given to any potential harmful effect on the child or on the quality of services that he or she needs; and
3. A child with a dis/ability is not removed from education in age-appropriate regular classrooms solely because of needed modifications in the general education curriculum (https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/b/300.116).

Despite laws and regulations that support students with dis/abilities and require compliance around providing instruction in the least restrictive environment, educational equity remains challenged and gaps in achievement and opportunities persist. This research seeks to examine and share the actions of one district that positively influenced gaps in student opportunity and data, between those with and without an identified dis/ability.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Dis/ability Theory

This study is based around a theoretical framework of critical dis/ability theory. Goodley (2013) identifies the word 'critical' as "denoting a sense of self-appraisal; reassessing where we have come from, where we are at, and where we might be going" (p. 632). Critical theory in general includes "a wide range of descriptive and normative bases for social inquiry which have the practical aim of maximizing human freedom and ending the domination of some groups by others defined by class, power, race or other social construction" (Hosking, 2008, p. 3). Critical dis/ability theorists specifically argue that the concept of *dis/ability* is a social construct recognized by differences in individuals (Artiles, 2015; Cologon, 2016; Oliver, 1996; Reid & Valle, 2004; Rocco, 2005), and that it is actually the physical and political environment around the individual that is the cause of the impairment (Friedman & Owen, 2017; Procknow et al., 2017). This occurs as a result of the reinforcement of dominant norms, which are in fact not norms for all people.

Throughout history, and today, there have been various different approaches that focus on supporting the success of students with a dis/ability and each of these views have varying ties to the notion of ableism. Ableism, or an "unconscious acceptance of able-bodied privilege" (Timberlake, 2020, p. 84), has been described on a continuum that can extend from acceptance of segregated settings to assumptions of what a healthy body is (and what is in an individual's control) (Timberlake, 2020). It is also said to be "perpetuated by culturally shared norms and values" (Bottema-Beutel, Kapp, Lester, Sasson, & Hand, 2021, p. 19), and is a form of stereotyping that is identifies individuals with dis/abilities as having fault for not meeting societal expectations or norms (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2020; Bogart & Dunn, 2019). Ableism may sort students by ability and/or segregate them into different learning environments (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2020), and so it is important to recognize the ways in which an organization structures it's systems for supporting students.

Throughout the study the critical dis/ability theory lens will be applied, acknowledging "disability as a dimension of human difference and not as a defect" (Creswell, 2013, p. 34). This view is shared by theorists who see dis/abilities as a result of social constructs, not individual deficits, and is essential in considering questions of systems and structures within the realm of education.

Research Assumptions

As a white, female, building-level administrator with limited background in teaching elementary-aged children with or without an identified dis/ability, there are inevitably biases developed through lived experiences that will be brought to the study. Unconscious prejudices, the result of experiences, media and conversations, are present in all people (Banaji & Greenwald, 2016; Bloss, 2017; Diangelo 2018). A qualitative researcher conducts their work

with a defined lens for how they see the world, and yet must remain open to contrary findings when studying a topic (Creswell, 2014; Stake, 2010; Yin, 2009). I come from a small town, growing up in a middle-class family that emphasized the importance of education. It was when I resided in college that I began to recognize anxiety within myself, although this grew exponentially as I got older and assumed more responsibilities. While I do not find this to be a dis/abling characteristic for myself, I do feel that without the proper supports in my life it would have a greater impact. I have had, and continue to have, the opportunities necessary to find success; however, I realize that this is not the case for all individuals (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). I am a privileged person that comes from generations of accomplishments, and thus am able to access the tools needed to support any struggles that I may have. I work in a school district that strives to eliminate educational inequity but see first-hand the differences that exist among individuals and what they have available to them. I see it, I understand the long-term impacts of these situations (Frattura & Capper, 2007; Theoharis, 2009), and I have a strong desire to change it.

It is understood that biases people have influence interactions with study participants (Seidman, 2013; Stake, 2010; Weiss, 1994; Yin, 2009), regardless of the researcher's vantage point and despite attempts to maintain objectivity. Furthermore, assumptions for studying the effectiveness of an equitable approach to education include interest and willingness of participants in the work being examined, in addition to honesty in their responses (Weiss, 1994). Although not an administrator within the district of study, I have worked in administration for over 15 years and there still may be an epistemological assumption, one regarding the relationship of the researcher to that being researched (Creswell, 1998), made by those involved. Time spent delineating my role as the researcher to the district is valuable and will allow them to

understand the purpose of the study (Yin, 2009). There was no additional incentive offered to participants, beyond the collection and analysis of data regarding the progress of the district/school being reviewed, it was simply my hope that, as with the people I have personally worked with, the passion these educators feel towards student success would ignite a desire to contribute to the research base.

This research highlights discrepancies between two groups of students—that of a majority and marginalized group population. For both groups, the selected district is assumed to have adequately and continuously worked to make a focus on educational equity a non-negotiable for the school. Staff is assumed trained to understand the history of marginalization and its impact on the school system, as well as information about student progress provided by school and class data. It also assumes that services articulated and provided for students with a dis/ability are commensurate with what is needed in order to access curriculum and instruction in the least restrictive environment.

Limitations of the Research

When conducting research, particularly when it involves human subjects, those involved need to attend to potential ethical issues. Although this research probes the effects of restructuring staffing and adjusting pedagogical practices, there will be no treatments administered to students or staff. Additionally, student data is gleaned from a public website and shall not be identifiable to individual subjects who were observed within the classrooms.

Within the context of this study, specific areas of research design and data collection may influence the outcome of the results (Creswell, 2014), mainly:

- *Site selection* - This study is aimed at describing the systems of one school that has successfully demonstrated , through student achievement data, the

implementation of structures aimed at providing educational equity for all children.

- *Classroom/instructor selection* - The instructional environments in this study will need to include students of historically marginalized group populations and be associated with the educators who will participate in the interviews.
- *Observed vs. reported practices* - In order to identify potential differences between espoused and enacted pedagogical practice, the methods for this study will include interviews, observations, and documentation review. The purpose of the observations was to make connections, or identify disconnections, between what educators are reporting and that which is being implemented. These were not able to be completed due to COVID-19 and the ensuing restrictions is caused
- *Researcher Bias* – I, the researcher in this study, have been involved in education for over fifteen years, both as a teacher and administrator. I have worked in both urban and suburban districts, although I grew up and spent the majority of my career in the suburban setting. Experiences that I have had regarding instructional planning and content delivery will impact interview questions and observations, despite attempts to remain objective.

Overview of the Study

The intention of this research is to examine one school district's practices towards creating educational equity, which has resulted in a disruption of academic gaps between students with and without a dis/ability. The study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 provides the statement of the problem, the study's purpose, significance, assumptions, and limitations. Chapter 2 reviews relevant literature on special education regulations and evolving

approaches addressing persistent gaps in educational equity. Chapter 3 outlines the design and methodology for conducting interviews and observations, plus processes used to collect and analyze data. Chapter 4 will present the findings, and Chapter 5 will discuss the results and implications of this research study.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The foremost purpose of this research is to analyze on one school's experience with striving towards educational equity between students with and without an identified dis/ability. Despite decades of attempts to remediate inequities between student groups, opportunity gaps within the educational setting remain pervasive. This literature review will discuss the progression of laws and service delivery approaches focused on educating children with identified dis/abilities in United States public schools, beginning in the 1960s.

Chapter 2 provides an examination of historical special education practices and policies, as well as research and legislation describing approaches used to educate students with dis/abilities. This literature review was conducted with the majority of research being pulled via the library databases at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Computer hard drive and an online bibliographic management program (RefWorks) were used to save and house relevant articles. Key search terms include *Integrated Comprehensive Services (ICS) for Equity, achievement gaps, opportunity gaps, ableism, critical dis/ability theory, constructionism, special education, service delivery models, inclusive education, co-teaching, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), special education services, leadership, relationships (and educational equity), Regular Education Initiatives (REI), mainstreaming, full inclusion and Individuals with Dis/ability Education Act (IDEA).*

The focus herein is to examine the influences specific to discrepancies of educational equity between students with dis/abilities and their non-dis/abled peers. History has documented imparities in access to educational opportunities provided to children with dis/abilities, resulting in inadequate academic growth, and ultimately long-term success. Although hundreds of articles were examined for relevance and relationship to the study, this chapter is not intended to be a

comprehensive review of all work surrounding gaps within historically marginalized groups. As such, there were articles that fell outside a more detailed search on special education (for example those examining gaps among English Language Learners). Likewise, with a focus on elementary-aged students, areas of study were excluded due to their specificity to secondary and higher education-aged students. The literature review begins with an overview of the various movements in the delivery of special education, summarizing the historical steps taken before moving into a synopsis of model of inclusion utilized by the district selected for this case study.

Special Education Federal Regulations

Compulsory education, or the period of time education is required of a minor began to unfold in the United States during the mid-1800s. For some, this came with a conviction that access to public education was a birthright of Americans, while others described education as a means for Americanizing students and focused on assimilating all to a common norm while tracking those that were unsuccessful (Pai et al., 2006). Despite questions over a state's responsibility for determining if and when a child attends school, mandatory education progressed and turned what was once felt to be a moral obligation into a legal one (Katz, 1976). By 1918 each state had compulsory education laws in place (Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1984), however, they were not being applied to all children. At that time, it was generally assumed that students with significant intellectual dis/abilities could not, or should not, be educated (Brown et al., 1982). The "right for a child with a disability to be included in the educational process" (Anderegg & Vergason, 1996, p. 44) was tested in the court system, but despite laws stating otherwise, children with dis/abilities were often excluded from such practices (Zettel, 1977; Martin et al., 1996; Yell et al., 1998; Triano, 2000) and legislature allowing "specifically

authorized school officials to exclude students with disabilities" was upheld in the court system (Yell et al., 1998, p. 220).

It was during this time that public institutions specializing in the schooling and treatment of those with physical and mental illnesses, as well as what was termed 'mental retardation', were developed (Dorn et al., 1996). Although children affected by mild learning or behavioral dis/abilities may have been afforded the opportunity to be educated alongside their peers, those struggling from more significant cognitive or physical dis/abilities were not allowed to attend school, or, were educated in private settings or grew up to live in institutions (Friend & Bursuck, 1999; Snow, 2008). Spaulding and Pratt (2015) note that at that time people with dis/abilities were viewed as different or inferior, with the belief that "disability was inhuman and deviant, society moved people with disabilities from the public eye to institutions and hospitals" (p. 94). The development of education for children with dis/abilities initially utilized an approach termed the 'medical model' for servicing such students. This method labeled, placed, and served children that diverged from socially constructed norms in separate locations (Fisher & Goodley, 2007; Frattura & Topinka, 2006; Theoharis, 2009), based on the belief that learning problems or differences were the result of a disorder or disease – problematic within the person, and as such, required specialization to cure it (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011; Cologon, 2016; Massoumeh & Liela, 2012; Procknow et al., 2017).

When compulsory education requirements were secured, a growing emphasis on the construct of "normality" continued (Dudley-Marling, 2004; Fisher & Goodley, 2007), and special classes were developed for children who were deemed unsuccessful with the typical rigor of instruction (Stainback et al., 1989). Subsequently, "being different heightens one's vulnerability to injustices" (Artiles, 2015, p. 1) and it was felt by some that these special classes

were not purely developed as a means of supporting children with dis/abilities, but rather as a measure to address children that were "unwanted in the regular public-school classroom" (Stainback et al., 1996, p. 6).

By the early 1950s United States programs and institutions for the dis/abled were registering less than desirable outcomes; methods of instruction based on a segregated model were not shown effective in achieving educational goals (Massoumeh & Leila, 2012). Schools designed for students with handicaps often did not provide opportunities such as art, music, physical activities, or even contact with other (non-handicapped) children (Boyer, 1979), rather maintaining a strong emphasis on manual skills. When comparing students in a traditional education setting to those designed for children deemed dis/abled, the former was found to have further advancement in academic skills, prompting parents and advocates to endorse increased inclusion of children with dis/abilities into the general education setting, versus a segregated model emphasizing rehabilitation and restitution (Friend & Bursuck, 1999; Fisher & Goodley, 2007; Hehir, 2007).

In addition to changes in compulsory education practices, alterations in political and societal beliefs fueled the development of parental advocacy aimed at educational equity for students with dis/abilities. The landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) mandated the desegregation of schools, providing equal protection of educational rights for children of color; and advocates for students with dis/abilities referenced this when arguing that children with dis/abilities have the same rights as those without (Stainback et al., 1989; Yell et al., 1998). The ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) avowed that separate was *not* equal, and as such, advocates contended it was discriminatory to require children to earn the right to enter a classroom (Stainback & Stainback, 1996). History and research had shown that the more

segregated students are, the more unequal the outcomes (Cologon, 2016; Kirby, 2016; Smith et al., 2017). While there were those that challenged the analogy of civil rights, arguing that although skin color is irrelevant to education there are numerous factors (e.g. behavior) that are not, others pushed back citing "the education system as a means for advancement of its students in the society and a forum for debate about the nature of that society" concluding that "state-mandated segregations of persons with disabilities" paralleled what was seen in Jim Crow laws (Lipsky & Gartner, 1996, p. 13). Despite this, it took time for educational opportunities to evolve to include differences in language, gender, sexual orientation and ability (Smith et al., 2017).

Despite no direct mention of individuals with dis/abilities, The Civil Rights Act in 1964, which enforced the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, also provided influence to subsequent legislation serving to support special education practices. In the early 1970s, the case of *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1972) ruled that schools were not to exclude children with intellectual dis/abilities, while the case of *Mill v. Board of Education of District of Columbia* (1972) established several legal principles, including the rights of students with a dis/ability to access free public education and to be protected by due process prior to any placement changes (Friend & Bursuck, 1999). Both examples of litigation prompted changes to the Vocational Rehabilitation Act (Public Law 93-112) Section 504, serving to prevent discrimination against individuals with dis/abilities in programs receiving federal funds, laying the foundation to extend regulations supporting education for all.

Congressionally mandated special education services, in the public-school setting, date back to the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Often referred to as Public Law (PL) 94-142 (1975), EAHCA is thought to be

"one of the most far-reaching pieces of federal education legislation in American educational history" (Harkins, 2012, p. 2) due to the large number of students brought into the public schools. PL 94-142 was designed to address the discriminatory treatment of children with dis/abilities by assessing and assuring "the effectiveness of efforts to educate all children with disabilities", and assist states and localities providing such education (EAHCA, 1975). PL 94-142 was not meant to place all children in one educational setting; regulations required schools to offer a continuum of services (Stainback & Stainback, 1996). There are six main tenets described in PL 94-142:

1. The right to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE), in that all children are provided an education appropriate to their needs, at no cost to their parents.
2. Education is provided in the least restrictive environment (LRE), meaning that whenever appropriate the child labeled with a dis/ability must be educated in the regular classroom.
3. An individualized education program (IEP), a document describing an educational plan for the learner, will be collaboratively developed containing specific components.
4. Procedural due process will safeguard the child's education through confidentiality and written notifications. Parents and/or students also have the right to legal representation by legal counsel.
5. Nondiscriminatory assessments are to be completed by a multidisciplinary team, with unbiased tests provided by trained professionals.
6. Parental participation in the process is to be meaningful, and is required. (Martin et al., 1996; Project IDEAL, n.d.)

PL 94-142 went through various revisions and was officially reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 (Martin et al., 1996), with additional revisions occurring since that time.

Federal court decisions have clarified the following areas regarding the inclusion of students with dis/abilities to state the following:

1. School districts must consider placement in general education for all students with dis/abilities, regardless of the degree of dis/ability.
2. Academic and social benefits of placement in general education must be taken into consideration.
3. Such consideration must be more than a token gesture.
4. Placement in the least restrictive environment (LRE) is not "dumping" but rather placing students with dis/abilities in general education settings with the necessary supports, services and supplementary aids (Villa & Thousand, 2005).

Under IDEA, all children, regardless of the severity of the dis/ability, are guaranteed *free and appropriate public education* (FAPE), which is to take place in the *least restrictive environment* (LRE) (McLeskey et al., 2012; Osbourne & Russo, 2006). A minimum standard of what constitutes FAPE originally was established by the case, *Board of Education of the Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Rowley* (1982), stating that there must be evidence of some educational benefit, later expanded to "meaningful academic progress" (Osbourne & Russo, 2006, p. 29). LRE, defined as "the student's right to be educated in the setting most like the educational setting for non-dis/abled peers in which the student can be successful, with appropriate supports provided" (Friend & Bursuck, 1999, p. 2), includes a child's school of

attendance as well as classroom placement. A two-part inquiry, created by the Fifth Circuit Court in order to determine a child's placement, and included the following initial questions:

1. Has the school taken steps to provide supplementary aides and services to modify the regular education program to suit the needs of the dis/abled child?
2. Once modifications are made, can the child receive an educational benefit from regular education?
3. Will any detriment to the child result from placement in the regular classroom?
4. What effect will the dis/abled child's presence have on the regular classroom environment and, thus, the education the other students are receiving? (Martin et al., 1996)

The second part of the inquiry required schools to ask whether children were placed in the general education environment to the maximum extent possible. Prior to the enactment of PL 94-142, there was no real continuum of services, and many schools either denied children with dis/abilities access to public education or expelled them when educators were unable to manage or teach them (Huefner, 2006; Stanley, 1996). PL 94-142 was written to ensure that all students received the opportunity for an appropriate education at no cost to their parents, although it should be noted that while IDEA expressed a strong preference for placement in regular education classrooms, it did not require placement in their neighborhood school (Huefner, 2006; Stainback & Stainback, 1996).

The assurance that instruction take place in the least restrictive environment was accomplished and guaranteed by IDEA through the development of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), a document outlining the dis/ability of the child, their educational goals, and the placement for which specialized instruction would be provided. A misinterpretation of this law

was that students are required to be placed in smaller groups, with other students of "like" need, in a separate location in the school (Obiakor et al., 2012; Schwartz, 2006), locations to "concentrate on remedial teaching" (Butler, 1996, p. 862). Case law through the years, however, favored a more integrated model of delivering services to students (Huefner, 2006; Villa & Thousand, 2005). Proponents of an integrated approach referenced legislation on the matter such as IDEA 1997, stating that "special education is a set of services, not a particular place" (Huefner, 2006, p. 298). All of this was coupled with critical reviews of outcome data on special education classrooms, which demonstrated a large discrepancy between the academic learning occurring there, versus a general education classroom (Smith et al., 2017).

Counter arguments did exist supporting instruction in a continuum of locations, citing full inclusion as "illogical" (Kauffman & Badar, 2016, p. 56). Kauffman and Badar (2016) stated that presenting challenging standards and curriculum above an individual's ability "can be humiliating to that person" (p. 56) and counteractive to inclusion. It has also been stated that self-contained classrooms and homogeneous groupings are ideal for personalizing instruction (Kauffman & Hallahan, 2005); while others argue there are no separate environments in life, so why create an artificial one in the school setting (Stainback et al., 1989)? In spite of there being limited documentation of negative impacts on students without a dis/ability when placed in an inclusive setting, one review did identify negative academic and social effects with the inclusion of children with behavioral problems, relating it to the negative classroom climate and learning environment (Kalambouka et al., 2007).

Despite arguments and disagreements about the optimum location for instruction, there appeared to be consensus that high standards must be met when separating children from their peers (Hosp & Reschly, 2003; Kluth et al., 2002); and as such, safeguards have been put in place

through federal regulations. While courts have approved segregated settings over parental objections (*Beth B. v. Van Clay*, 2002), it is not without cause. Osbourne and Russo (2006) summarized characteristics that may determine a need for a more restrictive placement into categories such as student progression in placements, cost of maintaining a less restrictive environment, individual needs of the child (such as a low-incident-type dis/ability requiring contact with students with a similar dis/ability) and requiring specialized resources or home-to-school consistency in order for progress to be seen. Students struggling with behavioral needs are also given consideration, for any danger or severe disruption they may present to others (Osbourne & Russo, 2006). As summarized by Osbourne and Russo (2006),

> The bottom line is that an inclusionary placement should be the setting of choice, and a segregated setting should be contemplated only if a fully inclusive placement has failed despite the best efforts of educators or there is overwhelming evidence that it is not reasonable (p. 31).

Inclusionary practices provide access to more rigorous standards and instruction, protecting against disturbing trends in special education data, which show the existence of opportunity gaps, as well as poor long-term outcomes in areas such as employment (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996, Minich, 2016). Such practices also serve to reduce the amount of tracking and marginalization of students, which potentially create a type of caste system with detrimental academic and social impacts (Artiles, 2015; Frattura & Topinka, 2006; Gatto, 2002). The number of students labeled with dis/abilities has grown exponentially over the years, and students of color are significantly overrepresented when compared to actual populations (Connor et al., 2015). Moreover, students in special education often spend large portions of their day away from classmates, limiting opportunities for peer interactions (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Frattura &

Capper, 2007; Hosp & Reschly, 2002). This next section will discuss practices put in place in public school settings, as educators have endeavored to eliminate academic and opportunity gaps, beginning in the 1960s and leading up to present day; allowing the stage to be set for the research questions being asked in this study. Included in this discussion is mainstreaming, inclusion, the regular education initiative, full inclusion, and Integrated Comprehensive Systems for Equity. It will end with an overview of the critical dis/ability theory, thereby setting the stage for the research study.

Mainstreaming

Despite an increase of resources and support allocated for education beginning in the 1950s, children with dis/abilities did not truly feel an impact until the 1970s with the enactment of PL 94-142 (Stainback & Stainback, 1996). Its passage guaranteed all children the right to a free, public education; including those with a dis/ability. The trend, prior to this, had been to educate children with dis/abilities in alternative schools (if at all), however people noticed and questioned the inequities between school systems (Rodriguez, 1986). It was the resulting struggle with this information that resulted in an examination practices for grouping and educating children with dis/abilities (Franseth & Koury, 1966).

After comparing the outcomes of students taught in settings alongside their peers, with a more segregated approach, a definitive need for increasing inclusive environments was reported (Baker et al., 1995; Butler, 1996; Caparulo & Zigler, 1983; Lipsky & Gartner, 1995). Studies done at this time compared student growth and development in the areas of academic, behavior and social outcomes while examining various age levels and locations. One such study, completed by Caparulo and Zigler (1983), examined 19 public schools from three suburban communities in order to evaluate both academic and nonacademic impacts of mainstreaming.

This particular study noted higher academic growth at the intermediate school level for students in a mainstreamed environment; however, the reverse was found at the junior high level (Caparulo & Zigler, 1983). Other studies identified greater gains in specific academic areas, such as reading, over more consistent results in the area of math (Wang & Birch, 1984). A meta-analysis done by Baker et al. (1995), comparing the effects of mainstreamed environments in numerous studies, identified beneficial impacts on both academic and social outcomes, matching results from an earlier analysis by Wang and Baker (1985).

The consequence of such research was a movement focused on altering the educational environment available to students (Stainback & Stainback, 1996); an emphasis on educating individuals with dis/abilities in the least restrictive environment while maintaining educational opportunities for all. Mainstreaming was labeled as one such movement associated with the LRE mandate in the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). Mainstreaming was intended to allow students with dis/abilities access to regular school settings, provided they had demonstrated the ability to function there successfully, a point in itself that demonstrated a marginalization towards those that functioned outside of what society as determined to be the norm.

Although primarily assigned to a special education classroom, students with dis/abilities had the *opportunity* to attend portions of the day with non-dis/abled peers. Contained within this model was a full continuum of educational services, or what was originally deemed a "cascade of services" (Deno, 1970). These services were termed the *Full Continuum of Educational Services and Student Placement* and were defined at seven different levels (originally from Deno with modifications by Hocutt, 1996).

1. Level I – Attendance in general education class, without supplementary instructional supports, and with or without medical supports;

2. Level II – Attendance in general education class with supplementary instructional services delivered in the general classroom;
3. Level III – Part-time attendance in resource room;
4. Level IV – Full-time attendance in special education class;
5. Level V – Special schools;
6. Level VI – Homebound instruction;
7. Level VII – Instruction in hospital or domiciled setting

Friend and Bursuck (1999) articulated mainstreaming as "the term for placing students in general education settings only when they can meet traditional academic expectations with minimal assistance, or when those expectations are not relevant" (p. 3). This meant that children with mild impairments were given the opportunity, or were allowed to participate in regular-education schools and classes (with specialized instruction provided in a resource room), while those with more moderate to severe impairments continued to be educated only in special classes or schools (Butler, 1996). Mainstreaming was not seen as a right for all, but rather a concession made for those that were not too outside of what was deemed typical, or those that could blend in. Because two main requirements of PL 94-142 were to provide students with dis/abilities education that benefitted their unique learning needs, in as close proximity to their non-dis/abled peers as possible, mainstreaming was an important start to changing student placements for servicing. There were, however, and still remain various levels of implementation. These are often driven by the degree of student differences, the capacity of the school or educator, and the willingness of the system to support those that deviate from the norm.

At the time mainstreaming focused on integrating mildly dis/abled children in the general education setting for a specific portion of the day (Hocutt, 1996; Friend & Bursuck, 1999).

Special education services, often referred to as ‘special classes’ (Dunn, 1968; Kavale & Forness, 2000), were still deemed essential for enhancing the education of children with a dis/ability, despite the failure to identify superior performance in such classes (Larrivee & Cook, 1979). As such, opportunities for children with mild handicaps to receive instruction in an environment alongside peers, was a goal but not a requirement (Bekirogullari et al., 2011). Sebba and Sachdev (1997) defined the process of mainstreaming as an educational institution’s restructuring of its existing systems, so that students received equity of opportunities in their natural environment. Others explained its main objective as being to educate students with special needs, “owing to any deficiency” (Bekirogullari et al., 2011, p. 621), in the regular education environment. A third, and perhaps more demoralizing view of mainstreaming, was the idea that students with dis/abilities had to “earn” their right to the generalized classroom (Fuchs et al., 1993). This concept being one example of institutional ableism, which maintains oppressive structures within education (Annamma et al., 2018).

The legal definition of FAPE concentrated more on the theoretical meaning of the term mainstreaming, as opposed to stipulating the amount of time students were to be placed among peers (Kavale & Forness, 2000); a factor which may have contributed to the wide variance among schools when looking at the implementation of mainstreaming students. Mainstreaming has been described as a partial integration of children with dis/abilities, representing an idea without actually providing answers to when and how to accomplish it (Kavale, 2002). Some schools focused on providing opportunities among non-dis/abled peers within the classroom to the maximum amount possible, while others considered children mainstreamed if they participated in lunch, recess, or physical education activities with other students (Friend & Bursuck, 1999). The factors used to determine the extent of mainstreaming can be complex,

requiring a team of educators to make decisions specific to the needs of an individual child (Caparulo & Zigler, 1983). Zigler (1977) also goes on to argue: “criterion upon which social policies should be based is the optimal development of the handicapped individuals for whom these practices are designed” (as cited in Caparulo & Zigler, 1983, p. 85-86). The complexity of the placement discussion was one challenge of the mainstreaming movement.

The effectiveness of mainstreaming has been debated, with factors such as academic achievement, behavior, and attitudes being measured. One thought for why is associated back to variability in organizational approaches to mainstreaming, philosophical beliefs of individuals, and the opportunities they created for students with dis/abilities. For example, Wang and Birch (1984) conducted a comparison between a full-time mainstreaming approach and the use of a resource room for instruction. The results indicated more time on-task, with fewer teacher-prescribed activities, in the mainstreamed room, however showed greater reading academic gains in only one of three test areas, with math assessment results being comparable between the two service delivery approaches in all three tests (Wang & Birch, 1984).

Wang and Baker (1985) further examined research of this topic, conducting a meta-analysis that looked at the efficacy of mainstreaming as a special education approach. Their review of articles published between 1975 and 1984 scrutinized 264 studies, resulting in the inclusion of 11 articles, and finding mainstreamed dis/abled students consistently outperformed their counterparts placed in special classes (Wang & Baker, 1985). This was particularly noteworthy due to the consistently positive effects sizes in performance, attitudinal and process outcomes for mainstreamed students, especially when compared to studies that conclude placement in regular classes is only more effective for special education students with higher IQs (Carlberg & Kavale, 1980; Leinhardt & Palley, 1982). This limitation led to mainstreaming

being deemed, in-part, unsuccessful due to its inability to incorporate students with more moderate to severe dis/abilities into the classroom environment (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994; Harkins, 2012). Despite law indicating that all children are to receive education in the least restrictive environment, educators were still determining who met criteria for the general education classroom. Friend and Bursuck (1999) defined mainstreaming as "the term for placing students with disabilities in general education settings only when they can meet traditional academic expectations without minimal assistance, or when those experiences are not relevant" (p. 3), however even with this definition there was a wide variety of implementations based on the expectations and social constructs of culture.

A final component resulting in questions about the accomplishment of mainstreaming was the attitudes and perceptions of educators, which has been described as questionable at best (Bekirogullari et al., 2011; Harkins, 2012; Larrivee & Cook, 1979; Stoner, 1981). Measurements of this showed a range of views, resulting perhaps due to a shift in responsibility coupled with limited training or even choice of which students to support, within the classroom (Stoner, 1981). In one study Ringlaben and Price (1981) randomly selected 250 Wisconsin teachers, grades kindergarten through 12, to assess their views using a 22-item questionnaire. The results showed that while a majority of teachers with students mainstreamed into their classroom felt that it worked "somewhat", only 30% perceived it to work well and nearly 25% indicated that it was not working well. Additionally, 52.8% of teachers felt there was a positive effect of mainstreaming on the mainstreamed student, while only 31.6% felt there was a positive effect of the regular students in the class on the mainstreamed student (Ringlabien & Price, 1981). What wasn't defined was the definition of "working"; what determined a positive effect and was this consistent across teachers? Further studies on mainstreaming found teacher perception of

success to be the most important effect on teacher attitude, with influence by factors such as grade level taught, administrative support received and availability of support services (Larrivee & Cook, 1979). This study was summarized as stating that teachers are "generally accepting of special students if the teachers can rely on the necessary support from other personnel" (Larrivee & Cook, 1979, p. 321). Mainstreaming also demonstrated the underlying belief that there is a certain expectation for children in the educational setting. For students to be included they needed to show a level of competency, determined by those in charge. There was an assumption that this was the "norm" and that it was appropriate to expect all to perform at such a level.

Inclusion

Arguments over the placement of the delivery of services for children with dis/abilities date as far back as the 19th century (Dorn et al., 1996). Four specific stages have been noted throughout history, starting with exclusion (from all social contexts), segregation (education separated from society), integration (allowing for socialization) and finally inclusion (incorporating social structures along with academics) (Rodriguez & Garron-Gil, 2015). Whereas mainstreaming was seen as an exploration of integration (with some academics being incorporated by individual assessment), it did not resolve all educational opportunity inequities for children with dis/abilities. Innovative teachers and parents began to advocate for a truer integration of their students into the general education environment, inclusion. Hocutt (1996) differentiates inclusion from mainstreaming as the concept "implies that most children with dis/abilities will be educated in the general education classroom for most, if not all, of the school day" (p. 79).

Friend and Bursuck (1999) propose that "inclusion represents the belief or philosophy that students with disabilities should be integrated into general education classrooms whether or

not they meet traditional curricular standards" (p. 4), whereas others describe inclusion as the bringing of special education services to the student, as opposed to student bring brought to the services (i.e. different classroom or school). This was a distinct difference in educational practices, for with mainstreaming students were not necessarily viewed as a member of the classroom but rather a visitor; and this was only if they were able to do so successfully (as deemed by the teacher), and independently (as minimal assistance was provided). Here again, students were expected to meet a specific measure, in a certain way, and a certain timeframe. Inclusion implied a student's "participation in the general education settings as full members of the classroom learning community" (Friend & Bursuck, 1999, p. 4), and incorporated additional supports and accommodations to allow the child to remain in the classroom. Practices, such as providing a one-on-one aide for behavioral and/or academic help and making adaptations to simplify or change materials/assignments, were meant to be dependent on the needs of the child and provided by the support of a special education teacher. Advocates of inclusion argued that separating students from their non-dis/abled peers were not only stigmatized by this practice, but the resulting transitions equals a minimization of access to instruction, which is often not as specialized as it needs to be to address the specific needs of the child (Salisbury et al., 1995; Friend & Bursuck, 1999).

Despite practices and services designated to meet the unique needs of individual children, there were limitations of time spent in the general education classroom, and a gap continued to exist between the academic performance of children with and without a dis/ability. Educators searched for ways to address this gap, with limited success, including looking at interventions, curriculum modifications, instructional differentiation, and service delivery models. Wang et al. (1988) indicate that the most pressing issues at the time of inclusion included "flawed

classification and placement systems, disincentives for program improvement, excessive regulatory requirements, fragmentation, and lack of coordination of programs and loss of program control by school administrators" (p. 248). Inclusion in the 1980s was also limited to children with less severe dis/abilities, those with learning dis/abilities and behavior disorders or essentially those that educators felt had the ability to reach the level of their peers. Here again, those with more significant handicaps were not deemed to have the ability to participate in the classroom setting as it was set up and discussions on ways to make the learning accessible to all within the general education environment simply did not occur.

While supporting those with more significant intellectual dis/abilities generally remained a segregated process and placement, progress was made in some areas. Researchers argued that the environment in which children receive instruction plays a significant role in what their post-school life looks like, and by denying access to segregated programs, there is a long-term impact (Brown et al., 1989). Parents also rejected segregated schools as "acceptable educational service delivery models" (Brown et al., 1982), in favor of attendance at "regular schools". Those in favor of this model understood the spirit of PL 94-142 to be for all people to exist in heterogeneous community environments, and as such, school should prepare them for this (Brown et al., 1980; Brown et al., 1982). Advocates saw this as "the quest for a decent quality of life" (Clark & Knowlton, 1987, p. 547).

During the late 1980s the notion of a transdisciplinary model began to develop; such that therapeutic and instructional supports could also be provided within the school setting. For children requiring supports from more than one discipline, the model moved from multidisciplinary to an interdisciplinary approach (indicating a reciprocal and combining of individual elements), and finally, transdisciplinary when services are provided across and beyond

individual elements (Giangreco et al., 1989). This approach capitalizes on the communication, interaction, and cooperation among team members specializing in distinct disciplines, in order to best support the child – providing them the necessary opportunities to find academic success (ERIC Digest 461). Giangreco et al. (1989) indicated that by "coordinating and synthesizing their unique skills" (p. 55), individuals receive a more consistent and integrated educational program. This, by definition, lends itself to the least restrictive option by implying an integrated educational setting and approach to instruction (York et al., 1990). It was also assumed that the integration of categorical and regular education programs would improve their effectiveness, and that learning for all would increase with a structure that is less disjointed (Wang et al., 1988; Will, 1986).

By 1990 the emphasis on where to provide instruction and the ramifications of the learning environment had strengthened (Sailor, 1991). To allow the integration of children with dis/abilities, education was to be provided within the student's regular school, with specialized instructional services being offered both in and outside of the general education classroom. Students within that general school setting had enhanced opportunities to be integrated into extraneous school settings and events, as well as the classroom for their academic instruction (for at least a portion of the time). This integration allowed for increased opportunities for students to build peer relationships and, ultimately, advanced the discussion of academic and instructional inclusion. Snow (2008) states, however, that although "some progress was seen, but many realized that a big chunk was still missing: physical integration did not necessarily ensure social integration" and while a child may be in the environment, they were still "not seen as a true member of the classroom" (www.disabilityisnatural.com).

In spite of positive movement towards an inclusive framework, Will (1986) identified four main problems with the approach used to provide special education services:

1. Services for children in need of special education were approached in fragmented, categorical programs. This approach impaired the programs' effectiveness and created the opportunity for children to "fall through the cracks".
2. Special and regular education operated as dual systems, weakening the role of the classroom teacher and building administrator. Students were removed from regular classrooms, and the instruction they received was not coordinated with the regular classroom.
3. Students that were separated from peers faced the possibility of being stigmatized and suffering negative consequences, such as lowered self-esteem and unhealthy attitudes towards learning.
4. The rigid eligibility requirements associated with special programs can create conflict between parents and school personnel, particularly when there is disagreement about a child's placement in a program.

One key component to the argument against inclusion also seemed to come out of fear (Kaufmann, 1995; Soodak, 1994). Those opposing inclusion articulated that movement away from special education represented an end to the protections afforded children with dis/abilities, protections that were hard-won over a number of years (Friend & Bursuck, 1999; Sailor & McCart, 2014). Whereas others argued that it was fear of those that are different, and a desire to protect how things have always been done, that kept inclusion from moving forward. These concerns, coupled with the lack of student academic progress, kept educators exploring further options to meet the unique needs of all individuals.

Regular Education Initiative

With continued concerns about meeting the needs of all students, and the ineffectiveness identified in segregated, pullout programing (Semmel et al., 1991; Will, 1986), educators and parents engaged in the restructuring of special education supports and the Regular Education

Initiative (REI) was proposed. REI has been explained as a "call for reform of extant special education service delivery systems" (Semmel et al., 1991, p. 9) that "emphasizes adapting the regular education environment to better accommodate the student's needs" (Whitworth, 1994, p. 3); although some felt that the REI debate was one of policy and research as opposed to actual implementation (Davis, 1989; Semmel et al., 1991). While the REI held commonalities of mainstreaming and the onset of inclusion, the movement advocated for the general education system to assume "unequivocal, primary responsibility" (p. 440) for the education of *all* students (Davis, 1989), or full access to a restructured mainstream approach to education (Skrtic, 1987). The REI was seen as the combining or restructuring of the dual systems of regular and special education (D'Alonzo & Boggs, 1990; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994); an encouragement of "both regular and special education personnel to work together to provide the best education possible for all children" (Whitworth, 1994, p. 3) and "an emphasis of adapting the regular education environment to better accommodate the student's needs" (Whitworth, 1994, p. 3). Advocates of the REI also declared this as movement away from what they felt was segregationist special education (Whitworth, 1994; Kauffman, 2001).

The proposed merger between general and special education came with a recognition that that although all children having different ability levels (in intellectual, physical and psychological characteristics), they maintain the capability to learn in most environments (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987). Kavale (2002) further described five tenets of REI:

1. Students are more alike than different, so truly 'special' instruction was not required.
2. Good teachers can teach all students.

3. All students can be provided with a quality education without reference to traditional special education categories.
4. General education classrooms can manage all students without any segregation.
5. Physical separate education was inherently discriminatory and inequitable (p. 204).

With this in mind, the goals of the REI were outlined as a means to address these points; focusing on a merger of special and general education into one all-encompassing system, substantially increasing the number of children with dis/abilities in general education classrooms, and finally, strengthening the academic achievements of students with dis/abilities (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994).

The REI also maintained that oversight of categorical programs were to remain with building administration and classroom teachers, something not previously found in other initiatives. Prior to this, other approaches developed to improve the public-school services to children not finding success learning in a mainstreamed environment gave little thought to financial efficiencies, and focusing oversight by one organization was an effort to minimize wasted resources (Jenkins et al., 1990). Successful merging of regular and special education programs required delivering "effective, coordinated and comprehensive services for all students, based on individual educational needs, rather than eligibility for special programs" (Will, 1986, p. 413), as opposed to segregated programming emphasizing differences in children (Byrnes, 1990). The REI proposal was designed to use resources more effectively and flexibly, while empowering the classroom teacher to orchestrate education of all of their students (Wang et al., 1988; Jenkins et al., 1990; Whitworth, 1994). It also maintained a proactive practice, meant to be

preventative in nature by providing instruction and early intervention to children before a serious learning deficiency was identified (Will, 1986).

The core of the REI was a team approach to the design and delivery of instruction (Whitworth, 1994); and while the REI literature does not explicitly state classroom teacher responsibilities, some assumptions summarized by Jenkins et al. (1990), include:

- Classroom teachers have the ultimate responsibility in educating all students assigned to them, regardless of area requiring support. This includes academic learning, which is primary, as well as behavior, social and emotional components.
- Classroom teachers have authority to make and monitor instructional decisions for all students in their classroom, including both major and day-to-day decisions. They are responsible for developing a plan to service the student, select curriculum, monitor progress and adjust accordingly.
- Classroom teachers are to implement a normal developmental curriculum, adapting it when progress deviates from the expected and seek help from specialists as needed.
- Classroom teacher manage instruction for a heterogeneous classroom through the creation of smaller, more homogeneous groups, providing individualized help to students, and seeking additional resources when needed.
- Classroom teacher have responsibility to seek and coordinate assistance for students in need, bringing services into the mainstream setting.

Perhaps the biggest trepidation surrounding the REI was disagreement on consensus for a definition, particularly with regard to the roles and responsibilities of educators within the system (Davis, 1989; Lieberman, 1990; Thousand & Villa, 1991). The REI has been referred to as a part

of the educational jargon, with "little consideration of its meaning and assumptions that it embraces" (Pugan & Johnson, 1988, p. 6), as well as an "impressionistic sketch, drawing in broad strokes both the nature of the problems requiring attention and possible solutions" (Jenkins et al., 1990, p. 480). It addressed the *what* without addressing the *how*, and quite honestly for some, the *why*. Questions arose whether or not to hold the classroom teacher primarily responsible for meeting curricular needs of *all* students, and if they even had the capacity to do so (Semmel et al., 1991). Did full integration, as a result of the REI, include those with severe dis/abilities, and if so, was there agreement to this being best practice (Lieberman, 1990)? Over time the expectation around the responsibilities for teachers implementing the REI were argued to be staggering and unreasonable (D'Alonzo & Boggs, 1990; Jenkins & Pious, 1991; Thousand & Villa, 1991). Waitoller and Artiles (2013) explain "a critical imperative for the development of inclusive school systems is the capacity to nurture and develop teachers who have the understanding, skills, critical sensibilities, and contextual awareness to provide quality educational access, participation, and outcomes for all students" (p. 320), and whether or not educators received the appropriate preparation to support such diverse needs is questionable. Were teachers set up in a manner that would allow for all students to find success in their classrooms?

Despite providing an initial description of basic assumptions of the REI, which outlined expectations for general education teachers (Jenkins et al., 1990), Jenkins and Pious (1991) revisited the work by studying "REI-like" programs through observations and teacher supports. These were classrooms that attempted to implement supports and treatment for children with a dis/ability through the general education classroom teacher and in the general education setting. Jenkins and Pious (1991) found a great deal of variability in teacher ability, as well as teacher

willingness, to support such an approach during their investigation. This variability of implementation and success resulted in the conclusion being made that they "do not think that it would be realistic to expect all teachers to manage all of the responsibilities" (Jenkins & Pious, 1991, p. 563), as discussed in their earlier article.

It has been stated that in order for the REI to succeed, it must be adopted school-wide so that "everyone shares its philosophy and objectives" (Whitworth, 1994, p. 5), however as time went on it became increasingly clear that there was a lack of cooperation between the general and special education systems (D'Alonzo & Boggs, 1990). Much of the discussion took place between scholars and researchers, with claims made that general education teachers didn't have much of a role in said discussions (Davis, 1989; Lieberman, 1990; Semmel et al., 1991). Perhaps this area (of which there is limited research), of whether or not those involved in the system (i.e. general and special educators) felt that there had been an actual need or value to change, requires further examination (Davis, 1989; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994). A study by Coates (1989) suggested that regular education teachers were not generally supportive of the REI, showing little concern with pullout programming. Additionally, studies conducted by Semmel et al. (1991) indicated that both groups of educators were not fully dissatisfied with the service delivery system as it was, perhaps influencing the level of implementation success (Davis, 1989). Some teachers indicated concern for a negative change in the distribution of instructional classroom time, feeling that curricular objectives, which are determined by political and societal structures, would not be met with the inclusion of students with dis/abilities (Semmel et al., 1991).

The REI has been described as "a change process, rather than a program" (p. 5), and as such required a commitment to change from those involved in the implementation (Whitworth, 1994). Research results from Semmel (1991) indicate that general education teachers did not all

perceive themselves as capable of adapting instruction for each student, despite evidence of otherwise (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987; Stainback & Stainback, 1985). The impact that such questions and beliefs played in the success of the REI movement may be unknown, but given the empirical evidence that teacher expectations wield extraordinary influence on student success, they appear to be significant.

Full Inclusion

As society moved into the 1990s, and gaps among historically marginalized groups persisted, educators continued to look closely at the work being done in schools to support students with a dis/ability. Legislatures provided guidelines for schools that students attended, as well as the amount and level of services, but had not completely addressed the educational needs of those labeled with a dis/ability. Discussions on integration broadened, with extremely diverse opinions coming out as the 0% club, those that spend no time in the regular education classroom, and the 100% club, those that spend their entire day in the regular education classroom (Brown et al., 1991). Eventually a continuum of inclusion, "placement of students with a dis/ability into the regular classroom full time with special services provided" (Mamlin & Harris, 1998, p. 386), was defined. Special education reform, termed *inclusive schools* or full inclusion, had officially begun (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994) and it was about more than placement. Falvey and Givner (2005) articulate that "inclusive education is about embracing everyone and making a commitment to provide each student in the community, each as a citizen in a democracy, with the inalienable right to belong" (p. 5).

While special education service delivery had utilized components of inclusion for some time, full inclusion's components moved beyond previous perspectives. Stainback, et al. (1996) specified that "the goal in such schools is to be sure that all students, regardless of any individual

differences they might have (be they classified dis/abled, at-risk, homeless or gifted), are fulling included in the mainstream of school life" (p. 31). Others described full inclusion's focus on the organization of system and school-based management (Murphy, 1995), under the belief that educators' primary responsibility for children with dis/abilities should be to help them establish friendships with non-dis/abled persons (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998). Fuchs and Fuchs (1994) further describe it as a "decentralization of power and the concomitant empowerment of teachers and building-level administrators; a fundamental reorganization of the teaching and learning process" (p. 299). Still others professed the inclusive school to be essentially devoid of special education, since the LRE had become the general education classroom (Kavale & Forness, 2000; Taylor, 1988). The Association of Persons with Severe Handicaps (TASH), a leader in dis/ability advocacy, supported the movement with hopes that the system would be responsive to the needs of all children and promote full inclusion, educating all children in a mainstream environment (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994; Kavale & Forness, 2000; Kavale, 2002).

Proponents have branded full inclusion as a means to maximize access and equity for students in special education (Kirby, 2017; Obiakor, 2011), allowing children to connect with peers while being exposed to a rigorous education (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2008). On a large-scale perspective, it too has been considered a philosophical belief towards the education of individuals, as opposed to a program or intervention (Brown et al., 1991; Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2008; Idol, 2006; Wang & Reynolds, 1996), with instructional practices focused on equity in education for all children throughout their day by way of accommodations and modifications (Zigmond & Baker, 2001). Proponents stressed that by doing so, those with dis/abilities will benefit from exposure to the best peer models, while the resulting instructional changes will "enhance the development of all students" (Brown et al., 1991). From a social

justice perspective, inclusion implies the right for all to belong as they are, versus earning the right by conforming to or meeting a predetermined set of expectations (Brown et al., 1991; Favley & Givner, 2005; Hitchcock et al., 2002).

The conception of full inclusion also addressed concerns that a dual system, regular and special education, was fragmented and poorly coordinated (Greer & Greer, 1995; Jenkins et al., 1988), with advocates believing that a single system responsible for teaching all children would be more effective, and result in fewer children falling through the cracks. Successful full inclusion requires adult collaboration to identify areas in need of service, as well as all teachers to assume responsibility for providing such supports to all students (Fischer et al., 2003; Robinson, 2017; Vakil et al., 2008; Zigmond, 1995). Collaboration begins as the IEP teams convene, building trust and understanding (Harkins, 2012), then planning for instruction by utilizing all necessary resources to provide learning opportunities for each child (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1997; Robinson, 2017; Zigmond & Baker, 1995). The implementation of full inclusion caused the classroom teachers' role to shift. While they continued providing content and curriculum knowledge, they also relied on collaboration with special education teachers trained to understand dis/abilities and supportive learning strategies in order to support specific student needs (Friend & Bursuck, 1999; Greer & Greer, 1995; Schwartz, 2006; Villa & Thousand, 2005).

While many advocates of full inclusion argue the value of this approach to education, some opponents contended that change was too rapid (Wang & Reynolds, 1996) and question the willingness of educators and ability of structures to meet all student needs (Fuchs et al., 1993). This has been a common theme across the history of educating children with dis/abilities, with questions dating back to the inception of mainstreaming (Kavale, 2002; Larrivee & Cook, 1979;

Ringlaben & Price, 1981; Stoner, 1981). Educators themselves have articulated feelings of inadequacy in supporting children with dis/abilities, stemming from a lack of sufficient time, training and/or assistance (de Boer et al., 2011; Kavale & Forness, 2000; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1997; Robinson, 2017; Schwartz, 2006); they have also expressed a preference for a more conservative approach to inclusion and voiced a desire to have students accompanied by other supporting adults (Idol, 2006). One must question how this preference connects to the social construct of dis/abilities, culture, and privilege, and if the "strengths and needs from nondominant communities" (Artiles et al., 2010, p. 251) are truly represented during the planning for instruction?

Opponents of full inclusion have argued that this approach implies the only way to recognize and support students as individuals is in the regular education classroom, a statement that some vehemently disagreed with (Lieberman, 1996). In fact, some feel that this is a direct violation of laws put in place to ensure educational rights of the dis/abled. Lieberman (1996) evidenced this sharing an excerpt from the National Joint Committee on Learning Dis/abilities (January, 1993), which stated:

> The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) (1993) support many aspects of school reform. However, one aspect of school reform that NJCLD cannot support is the idea that *all* students must be served only in regular education classrooms, frequently referred to as *full inclusion*. The committee believes that *full inclusion*, when defined this way, violates the rights of parents and students with disabilities as mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). (p. 18)

Historical Review

The educational system has cycled through multiple phases of segregation, separate programming, and inclusion, all without identifying a means for consistently raising each student's success to a level equivalent to that of their non-dis/abled peers. An experimental procedure by Fuchs et al. (1993) incorporated students with dis/abilities into general education settings. However, even within such an approach, various levels of programming were upheld as "options" (Fuchs et al., 1993, p. 152), reflecting a conservative stance and a philosophical belief that it is the individual that must adapt to current structures as opposed to creating environments that meet the needs of all. Despite continued debates and various service delivery designs, students labeled with an identified dis/ability frequently do not receive the resources or opportunities needed to access general education curriculums, and as such, continue to fall academically further behind their peers (Jeynes, 2015).

Discrepancies in educational opportunities continued to draw political attention. In 2001 Congress enacted The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in order to hold public schools accountable for all children (Lauen & Gaddis, 2012). While the law's intent was to ensure all students attain academic success, it was designed to do so through increased pressure on teachers, administrators, and students (Lauen & Gaddis, 2012). Politically driven guidelines articulated what students should know and be able to do, and high-stakes testing was implemented as a means to determine if schools were meeting performance targets. Additionally, sanctions were established for failing schools and extended opportunities for students attending them (examples: the ability to transfer to another school) (Krieg, 2009). Unfortunately, NCLB's higher stakes/greater punishment model did not strengthen public education either (Weingarten,

2010), and thus the journey to identify and establish a system of equity and support for all children has continued with little progress made towards the creation of educational equity.

Perhaps at the heart of the ongoing struggle to create educational equity for all is the determination of how to define and measure success. Additionally, questions remain of what adequate representation of the "norm" is and whether it is appropriate to measure all students against it (Milner, 2012; Reid & Valle, 2004). Dis/ability critical theorists ascertain positions indicating that dis/abilities are the product of social constructs or socio-economic relations (Artiles, 2015; Back et al., 2016; Bartlett & Rice, 2019; Dudley-Marling, 2004; Hehir, 2007; Priestley, 1998; Rocco, 2015; Tomlinson, 2004), and Kirby (2017) goes as far as to state, "special education is an institution shaped by societal norms" (p. 175). Furthermore, he describes the assumption that dis/abilities are deviant and should be eradicated via special education services (Kirby, 2017), while others denote that "the medicalization of disability cases human variation as deviance from the norm, as pathological condition, as deficit, and, significantly, as an individual burden and personal tragedy" (Linton, 1998, p. 11). And still others maintain that there is a false assumption that the human population can be divided up into two segments of "dependent (disabled) and independent (able-bodied)" (Oliver, 2007, p. 7) due to a 'reciprocity of dependence' that exists in modern industrial society relationships.

Language has often been found to reinforce the dominant culture's views on individuals or groups, and use of the term "dis/ability" has a long and somewhat controversial history with regard to concept of social constructs and oppression (Goodley, 2013; Hosking, 2008; Linton, 1998; Kliewer & Bilken, 1996; Oliver, 1986; Swain & French, 2000; Watts & Erevelles, 2004). Using dis/ability as a means to identify someone as 'able' suggests deficiency, becoming a matter of judgment as to what the individual is capable of (Kauffmann, 2008). Labeling is the

idea of a person or group, created within cultural contexts (Kliewer & Bilken, 1996), and the practice of this in the realm of special education dates back as far as 1965 and the passage of PL. 89-313, which required medical classification of a child in order for schools to receive financial assistance from the government (Triano, 2000). In a paper discussing eugenics and the normalization of school children, Baker (2002) reviews past literature indicating that while dis/abilities were referred to as a problem by some, there was perhaps an underlying view that went beyond a simple fear of the unknown. Her review of Campbell's (2000) work suggested:

> Rather a deep seated despise of unevenness, asymmetry, or imbalance that places bodies-minds labeled as disabled at the edge of the abyss, pushing the limits of human subjectivity, and creating an outlaw ontology. An outlaw ontology refers to a way of being or existing that is thought outside the normal and as such to need chasing down, like the unacceptable rogue outlaws of old Western films. (Baker, 2002, p. 674)

The ways in which people refer to others also showcases the ways in which they see them and their identity. The introduction to person-first language came in the 1970s with the "People First" movement (Best, Mortenson, Lauziere-Fitgerald, & Smith, 2022), and was reinforced during the AIDS crisis in the 1980s when activists professed this language as preferred over being labeled as a 'victim' (Lynch, 2019), it was the writing of the ADA that put the preferred terminology into policy, "allowing others to disassociate the disability as the primary defining characteristic of an individual, and viewing disability as one of several features of the whole person" (Ferrigon, 2019). Person-first language is "the structural form in which a noun referring to a person or persons (e.g. person, people, individual, adults, or children) precedes a phrase referring to a disability" (Gernsbacher, 2017, p. 859). Because status and identity are key components of dis/ability policy, the use of person-first language created an intentional

separation from previous terms that were felt to extend the marginalization of individuals with dis/abilities. There has been a shift in the use of person-first language in some instances, for example the Deaf community, as individuals view dis/ability as a part of one's identity (Andrews, Mona, & Pilarski, 2019). Gernsbacher (2017) even shares that "identifying with a disability is empirically demonstrated to be associated with improved well-being, self-esteem, and quality of life for persons with a wide range of disabilities" (p. 861). A focus on identity, rather than dis/ability, also acknowledges the multi-facets of individuals, and allows one to consider how dis/ability relates to other forms of oppression such as race, class, and gender.

The term "neurodiversity" is another way of understanding and viewing brain differences that exist among individuals. Recognized at a time when cognitive variations were only classified as inferior, neurodiversity is a paradigm shift in the way people contemplate mental functioning (Armstrong, 2015; Armstrong, 2017; Mzikar, 2018). As opposed to viewing those whose brain variations result in a different mode of thinking as deficient, neurodiversity suggest that individuals learn in unique ways and therefore educators must embrace a more progressive way of teaching (Griffin & Pollak, 2009). This philosophy is strengths-based; recognizing individual assets as key to identifying appropriate instructional approach versus a medical model approach which views a dis/abled person as a problem in need of fixing or patronizing. Neurodiversity, conceptualized in the early 1990's by those in the autism community to recognize and honor variations occurring naturally, has gained international prominence in recent years (Armstrong, 2017; Boroson, 2017).

Regardless of how differences or dis/abilities are viewed, data concerning graduation rates, admittance into higher-level courses, and college placement continue to reveal gaps between comparison groups (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). No matter the

measurement tool used, continuous and significant distinctions exist between student groups, affecting future opportunities for these individuals or groups. This discrepancy calls into question another side to the concept of opportunity: what experiences are students provided, and, what influence do these have over their educational path? Sailor (2015) suggests that "what is the best instructional situation for this student to successfully engage the general curriculum?" (p. 94), is a more appropriate question than the frequently asked, "what is the least restrictive place to instruct this student?" however, movement to align with this view and address current inequities in the educational environment require significant change for current systems (Sailor & McCart, 2014). Teacher preparation and experience, allocation of resources, and population class sizes have all been identified as American school district disparity concerns (Darden & Cavendish, 2011), and should cause educators and parents alike to call for reviews of policies and practices in order to ensure equitable educational opportunities for all children.

Ongoing concerns regarding a lack of education equity, coupled with the notion of special education placement, raises awareness for what the educational road does and could look like for a child labeled with a dis/ability. Since the beginning of modern education individuals have been held to specific expectations without appreciation for the different modes of entering into and expressing learning. This idea of 'normal' is determined by those in power, and instead of identifying ways for all to engage in education individuals have only been allowed when they meet certain criteria. The application of this theory does not work for all and if we want to see different results we must change our thinking.

Integrated Comprehensive Systems (ICS) for Equity

In an ever increasingly diverse world, evaluating educational policies and systems for equity remains critical. While many school settings propose to believe in the concept of full

inclusion, one has to ask if it is really occurring? It could be argued that the pervasive presence of gaps in student academic success, as defined by standardized assessments, as well as opportunities for instruction alongside non-dis/abled peers suggests that we have not yet realized the impacts of full inclusion. One might also question if simply addressing the placement of a child is the true answer, or if it is bigger than that. Integrated Comprehensive Services (ICS) for Equity is a relatively new framework (in the history of education) being examined and implemented to drive systematic student equity for all learners, with its application being used to address gaps that exist between student demographic groups. It can be clarified through the words of Frattura and Capper (2006):

- *Integrated* environments are the settings that all students – regardless of need or legislative eligibility – access throughout their day in school and non-school settings (p. 356).
- *Comprehensive services* refer to the array of services and supports centered on a differentiated curriculum and instruction that all students receive in order to ensure academic and behavioral success (p. 356).

At its heart, an Integrated Comprehensive System for Equity is one that identifies the unique needs of all learners', and organizes adults who support these needs in order to bring services to the children, based off a vision of "equity for all, the integration of students, and significantly raising the achievement of all students" (Capper & Frattura, 2009, p. 131). The conceptualization of equity is also an important piece to consider, as this identifies and provides what an individual learner needs, even if that is different than what another requires. Safir (2016) explained, "If equality means giving everyone the same resources, equity means giving each student access to the resources they need to learn and thrive" (n.p.). ICS for Equity framework

components are grouped into four main areas, or *Cornerstones*, developed to address the numerous levels of planning within an educational organization. These include (1) focus on equity; (2) align staff and students; (3) transform teaching; and (4) learning and leverage policy and funding (Capper & Frattura, 2017).

The First Cornerstone of ICS for Equity addresses the establishment of structures through a belief system grounded in educational equity and social justice. Within this is a focus on the creation and maintenance of integrated comprehensive services, often based around a set of equity non-negotiables, established by those within the organization. These statements of belief drive decisions made by all staff members, and provide a key shift from *programming* to *services* to recognizing that special education is a *service* and not a *place* (Schwartz, 2006). Historically districts have had programs often associated with specific populations or categories of students, which have resulted in segregated systems with services in silos (Frattura & Capper, 2009). Programs with this siloed approach are often run in isolation, and have parameters and limitations dictated by funding guidelines, such as those receiving federal dollars. Frattura and Capper (2009) describe the result as "separate systems with separate funding, separate staff and materials and a learning environment that is separate from other students" (p. 8).

A key component throughout the history of special education has been exploring differing means of integrating children with dis/abilities. Some strategies have focused on providing students the opportunity to be placed in an environment alongside their non-dis/abled peers, with a philosophy of such practice providing whatever is needed for *participation* in the school and classroom community (Banerji & Dailey, 1995). A truly integrated model will evaluate everything from the classroom community to more visual components (such as seating

arrangements), as well as the supports provided for peer participation and effective learning. Kluth (2013) explains:

> Inclusion is not about keeping up, participating in the same tasks as others, or meeting the same goals as one's classmates. It is about using the inclusive classroom and all that it offers (e.g. rich curriculum, high expectations, communication models, peer support) as a context for learning grade-level content and meeting IEP and other personal objectives. (p. 101)

Although frequently professed to provide students with the highest quality education, both academically and socially, the incorporation of children with dis/abilities in the general education setting has not been without debate. Questions continue to remain about whether a single teacher can truly able meet the needs of all learners within one inclusive classroom (Daniel & King, 1997; de Boer et al., 2011; Kavale & Forness, 2000; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1997; Robinson, 2017; Sailor & McCart, 2014; Schwartz, 2006). Opponents argue that regular education teachers may lack appropriate training and support to adequately meet needs of a diverse population, and that local school boards and districts are stressing an inclusive approach as a cost savings method (Shanker, 1994). There also are questions about whether specialized instruction truly can be given in the general education setting (Jones, 2012; Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003). Despite these questions, limited evidence of academic gains support ability grouping, or pullout, models of instruction (Bui, Quirk, Almazan, & Valenti, 2010; Idol, 2006; Lucas, 1999; Oakes, 1987; Oakes, 2005). In some instances, special education services have been found to have a negative or non-significant effect on a child's academic skills (Morgan et al., 2010). Some studies — specifically, in areas of mathematics growth for ability grouped gifted students (Matthews et al., 2013) or areas focused on very young learners (Hong et al.,

2012) – have found benefits to grouping students for instruction, indicating that it may in fact be essential to provide a continuum of service models in order to meet each student's individual needs and preferences (Klingner et al., 1998). Research in the area of inclusion continues today, with studies suggesting that such an approach produces preferable results in the areas of academic achievement and socialization, to one of segregation (Dalcin, 2022), indicating that schools should focus on "deliberately guiding classroom composition" (Balestra, Eugster, & Liebert, 2020, p. 39).

Despite having tenets of inclusion embedded within, ICS for Equity goes beyond such beliefs and recognizes that all children have strengths and struggles that need to be supported. ICS for Equity also notes the importance of supporting learning needs *before* there is evidence of failure, with services focused on preventing learning problems (Stainback & Smith, 2005). This change in philosophy requires some assumptions on the part of leadership and staff within the school and the values that they hold (Procknow et al., 2017). First, there must be a belief that the crux of any student failure is a result of the system, and, therefore, must be addressed by systemic changes within the system in order to prevent student failure. As Waldron and McLeskey (1998) articulate:

> Placement in an inclusive setting does not provide a panacea for students with LD, and the necessity remains to develop and implement instructional methods to increase the opportunities that these students have for learning important academic material, as well as for increasing the rate at which these skills are developed. (p. 403)

By recognizing and addressing personal biases, educators are able to see construction of dis/abilities as a result of cultural contexts and provide students with identity relevant,

differentiated curriculum, and surround them with adults organized and driven to meet each child's needs. All students are provided with opportunities to drive their academic success.

Philosophical realignment must be followed by appropriate practices including leadership and decision-making, which is where Cornerstone 2 enters in. Adults must be able to identify the academic and social-emotional needs of a child in order to provide instruction that supports (Cummins, 2009). Established systems to create a compassionate and supportive environment, in addition to shared norms and values, are the foundation for developing mutual trust and respect (Griffin, 2004; McCoach et al., 2010). A systematic method for monitoring student growth and responding to learning difficulties is another critical component of ensuring equity for all (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker et al., 2004). Unlike a medical model of special education, where learners are categorized and then pulled out of the classroom for instruction, this structure maintains a proactive approach to instructing a diverse group of learners to prevent academic struggles (Frattura & Capper, 2006).

In order to organize adults around the needs of each child, opportunities and expectations for decision-making must exist at multiple levels. All adults in the organization must work from the same platform and values; with classroom placement design, teacher collaboration and data teams making collective decisions around instruction focused on equitable opportunities. Students are to be heterogeneously mixed in classrooms, with representation of population groups proportional to the rest of the school to promote equity in classrooms and ensure staff collaboration to build atop children's innate talents.

One area for collaborative work to take place is among professional teaching and therapeutic staff. Along with providing a structure for addressing student learning, a strong partnership also will encompass areas such as a shared vision, ongoing inquiry, reflective

practice and supportive and shared leadership (Perez, 2011). When done appropriately, educators engaged in high quality collaboration focus their energies on examining student assessments in order to determine where they are in the learning process, and what steps need to be taken to further this growth (Friend & Cook, 1992; Friend, 1999; Stiggins & Chappuis, 2005). Incorporation of special education teachers into planning sessions allows for their specialized skills to be blended with content knowledge from regular education teachers (DuFour et al., 2004; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006; Villa & Thousand, 2005), creating a sense of shared, collective ownership for students. Successful partnerships occur when adults work together to provide students the experiences and support needed to be engaged learners (Benson, 2017). For this to occur, teachers must demonstrate their understanding of the child including their performance levels, targeted learning outcomes, and interests (Giangreco, 2017).

Within the ICS for Equity framework, Capper and Frattura (2017) identify three levels of decision-making teams to support the work within the educational setting; a district leadership team, school leadership team, and multiple co-plan to co-serve to co-learn teams. Although each team works at a different level, they all function to ensure a proactive approach to teaching and learning is in place to support the education of all students. These are key stakeholders within the organization and must share beliefs around educational equity so that they are able to provide leadership and strengthen the capacity of others, as well as themselves.

In addition to emphasis on school personnel structures, a focus on how the overall school system operates is crucial. This includes areas such as recruitment, hiring, supervision and evaluation of staff, ensuring that candidates entering the system understand and share a belief system embracing diversity. Leadership also clearly must articulate the non-negotiables of the system, clarifying all expectations to which the organization's members will be held. The

aforementioned plus reinforcement through the supervision and evaluation process are critical methods allowing school leaders to impact student achievement (Dhuey & Smith, 2014).

The third Cornerstone of ICS for Equity transforms teaching and learning through the development of adult capacity, offering of a continuum of services. A traditional educational system often views services as a vertical continuum through which individuals move through, as opposed to being able to access services on an 'as needed' basis. These services range in levels of restriction for the student (from majority peers), all the way from segregated schools to pull out instruction and finally co-taught, general education classrooms. While the designs' rationale is generally based on funding and adult specialization assumptions, which data has shown to be incorrect (Capper et al., 2000), it has been found to lead to fragmentation of a student's day, ultimately decreasing overall instructional time (Frattura & Capper, 2006).

Cornerstone 3 pushes educators to transform the educational system into an approach relying on shared expertise and collaboration to build the capacity of *all* of the adults within the system; turning this continuum horizontal for learners to access multiple forms of instruction throughout their educational experience (CAST, n.d.). In order to do this effectively, teachers must be provided high quality professional development to strengthen their instructional practices. Professional development is as critical as the time spent collaborating with colleagues; both required to not only identify what children's learning requirements but to also be responsive in the delivery so that students' independence and skills are maximized. ICS for Equity restructures the curriculum and instruction in order to benefit all children, forcing educators to take ownership for all learners (Capper & Frattura, 2009).

Incorporated into professional development for educators also must be a belief in identity relevant instructional practices. Ladson-Billings (1995) defines culturally relevant teaching as

resting upon three criteria: "(a) Students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order" (p.160), stating that it is a pedagogy of opposition "committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment" (p. 160). Cultural relevant instruction requires teachers not only to encourage academic success and cultural competency but also to recognize social inequities and their causes (Byrd, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995). ICS for Equity extends this premise through a utilization of *identity* relevant instruction, with a recognition that identity is not singular but rather involves multiple perspectives that come from the lived experiences of the individual (Buchanan-Rivera, 2019). Identify work begins with the educator understanding their own identity, or who they are as a person, as well as their beliefs. This is a critical first step in creating an equitable environment because of the influence people have over their surroundings. Our prior experiences and the beliefs that we hold will impact what a classroom looks like, how decisions are made, and the way we interact with others. Educators seeking equity must be intentional about their choices and it begins with looking inside.

ICS for Equity not only requires the educator to understand their own identity and beliefs, but it also examines all components of the individual learner. Doing so necessitates educators to collaborate, share expertise and develop each other's capacity, so that they can attend to students' academic needs without removing them from general education classrooms (Frattura & Capper, 2006; Frattura & Capper, 2007). Although it often is stated that a good teacher has high expectations for students, Whitaker (2004) proclaims that great teachers have "even high expectations for themselves" (p. 34), taking it upon themselves to take responsibility to have skills needed to teach any and all students in their class.

Schools truly committed to creating educational equity concentrate heavily on areas of high standards and challenging curriculum (Haycock, 2001). They also promote instruction that is appropriate to the diverse needs of students and emphasize ways in which a child assimilates information, engages in the learning process, and shows what they've learned. That type of instruction addresses components of the individual's identity as well as culture. These methods for structuring students, allows a more heterogeneous and representational grouping. Expectations must be consistently high, and additional attention must be given to accessing specific, evidence-based practices (Simonsen et al., 2010).

The ICS for Equity framework approaches instruction by realigning staff and students to proactively support all learners through co-planning to co-serve, which has notable differences to co-teaching. Co-teaching is the practice of two teachers sharing responsibilities for students in a classroom and evolved from a model of team teaching, with significant growth taking place in the 1980s when expectations for special education student performance continued to rise (Friend et al., 2010). Co-teaching has developed into a service option for students with dis/abilities, creating a more inclusive environment for all and allowing for students with dis/abilities to find success learning alongside their grade-level peers (Kluth & Straut, 2003). Cook & Friend (1995, p. 3) provide four of the most salient motivations for engaging in co-teaching: "Increase instructional options for all student, improve program intensive and continuity, reduce stigma for students with special needs, and increase support for teacher and related service specialists", each focused on improving student outcomes. This approach to teaming allows teachers to optimize their expertise while engaging more frequently with students (Kluth & Straut, 2003), and while there are numerous approaches to co-teaching, such as team-teaching, parallel teaching, and station teaching, all maintain a level of collaboration that includes things such as

shared goals for students, shared responsibility for key decisions, and shared accountability for the outcomes" (Friend & Bursuck, 1999). Co-teaching is also unique as a collaborative tool as it requires direct service to students with dis/abilities by the educators that are involved, versus indirect services such as coaching.

In practice, multiple co-teaching approaches can be applied (Friend et al., 2010) as long as the "premise of co-teaching rests on the shared expertise that special educator and classroom teacher collaboration brings to instruction, not merely on having two adults in the classroom" (Murawski, 2012, p. 8). The sharing of planning, instruction, and student assessment brings value to the learning experience (Brown et al., 2013; Chanmugam & Gerlach, 2013), as well as challenges for the model. This type of professional situation requires strong interpersonal and collaborative skills (Pancsofar & Petroff, 2013), and studies have shown that an unequal implementation of training for teachers moving into this type of service delivery model can impact its effectiveness (Murawski & Lochner, 2011; Strogilos & Stefanidis, 2015).

While co-teaching emphasizes the *presence* of two adults within a classroom, co-planning to co-serve focuses on the *planning* that occurs among all adults prior to instruction being given, better enabling resource sharing. Leaders working within the ICS for Equity framework look to hire educators who are "willing and able to teach across a range of students' needs" (Capper & Frattura, 2009), ideally holding dual certifications such as ESL, reading, or special education. As a result, more students can benefit from supports being offered while building the capacity of individual educators and students are less reliant on one particular staff member.

Additionally, when using a co-plan to co-serve approach, identified services can be provided by any of the team members because they are developed together. Funding limitations

often come into place around location of services, so more flexibility exists when students receive services in the location of their peers. Students who are not identified as having a dis/ability are able to receive similar instructional supports, provided they are able to access aid in the general education setting. Instructional provisions that are aligned closely to the components of ICS for Equity Cornerstones Two and Three emphasize collaboration around teaching and learning, and include documented progress and goals for individual students, as summarized by Frattura and Capper (2017): "Co-planning and co-serving teams (CCT's) are best able to determine how their students learn, and are engaged based on interest, to best design instruction through heterogeneous small group, large group, as well as 1:1 instructional opportunities" (www.icsequity.org). It should be noted that despite a search of ICS for Equity documentation there was no empirical research on CCTs found.

The fourth and final Cornerstone of ICS for Equity ties the system together through the leveraging of policy and funding. The work is completed at a higher level of the educational organization, which centers on allocation of resources, establishment of policies and procedures centered on success of students, and an integrated comprehensive service approach. Frattura and Capper (2004; 2015) argue that policies must allow for proactive changes, such as allowing for a range of assessments for students to demonstrate what they know, and these are guided through the development of Equity Non-negotiables. Educational leaders must recognize the need for change to ensure social justice for all, to make necessary changes in educational practices, and to avoid marginalization of student groups. The development of non-negotiables guides decisions being made throughout the organization by creating influence in aligning policy and practices (to said non-negotiables) such as retention and discipline. At a building level, the implementation of Cornerstone 4 is evidenced in how the school has operationalized funding and policy as well as

how it has embraced the Equity Non-negotiables. By applying the transformations from the first three cornerstones, the building intentionally expands the capacities of its people, allowing for a revision of the roles and responsibilities of those within. Not only does this allow for students to be taught in an identity relevant manner, but it also addresses funding concerns related to the current RtI structures for student services through the accessing of funds previously designated through categorical distinctions (e.g. Title, IDEA, etc.).

ICS for Equity is one approach towards the creation of an educational equitable experience for students, but it is not one that is well recognized in research to-date. In fact, despite publications on ICS for Equity over the years, there was little to no empirical data identified. Components of ICS for Equity, such as collaborative planning, co-servicing of students, and an overall belief that dis/abilities are socially constructed are identified in research, however, the entirety of the framework is rarely addressed and as such is not articulated well in research. One article details similar work done by Sailor and McCart (2014), through the SWIFT (Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation) Center, which is made up of five domains similar to the four in ICS for Equity. These include an administrative commitment to transformative inclusive education, instructional delivery that is data-driven and incorporates components of UDL, an integrated educational framework, family and community partnerships and district-level support and aligned policies. With this exception, research in the area of a fully equitable educational framework has remained, to some extent, siloed to individual components.

Moving Forward

Despite ongoing efforts of educators, scholars, and families, there has yet to be a successful, systematic approach to creating equitable learning opportunities for all children. Different locations and individuals have different approaches, and the result continues to be

issues of social justice that follow youth into society and their future. I believe that when analyzing existing gaps in educational equity, and means for closing them, it is vital to consider dis/ability through a sociological approach; the critical dis/ability lens. Early research emphasized the impact on families and addressed dis/abilities at the individual level, and the need to address this through interventions targeted to normalize people (Artiles, 2015; Cologon, 2016; Hosking, 2008; Minich, 2016; Watson, 2012). Despite the shift in mindset beginning in the mid-1990s to "reduce the disadvantage faced by dis/abled children" (Watson, 2012), research continued to show limited success in fully accepting and integrating children with dis/abilities into the general education setting. Even today there are alternative schools and separate classrooms for students that do not fit the 'norm' remain in public education systems, depriving students of experiences in order to maintain the status quo for the unmarginalized (Artiles, 2015). Transformational leadership is required to address practices that marginalize students and perpetuate cycles of educational and social injustice (Brown, 2004; Gorski & Pothini, 2014; Procknow et al., 2017). This study, built upon the aforementioned beliefs that an equitable approach to education is necessary for closing gaps in student opportunity and academic success, examines one approach utilized to provide services for all children through an equitable framework within the school setting. More specifically, the focus of this research is on approaches used to support students labeled with a dis/ability under IDEA. It includes analysis of the educational setting, resources, and staffing necessary to provide services in a child's IEP through a cohesive approach.

Although budgets will not be specifically addressed, professional learning will be examined as a resource. High-performing districts have been found to prioritize time and resources, creating professional development opportunities to transform beliefs, build skills and

deepen knowledge (Leithwood, 2010). This equips teachers with a range of content knowledge and strategies that enabling response to specific student's needs (Hirsch, 2006; Kennedy, 2010), and ensures a more consistent understanding of the goals, values and dispositions expected of personnel within the organization (Doubek & Cooper, 2007). Each of these areas must be carefully considered by leadership in order to provide consistency to ensure organizational equity, a key component of social justice in school systems, and will be investigated through the research process.

Literature Synthesis

A review of the literature surrounding educational equity has shown a mixture of methods utilized, seemingly dependent on the purpose of the study. Two main purposes divide the literature used; those that evaluate the impact on student learning, and those that evaluate the methods and application of methods used but have already demonstrated a positive impact on those involved. For studies focused on determining whether or not something has had an impact on student learning, the use of quantitative methods appears to be preferred. Those studies identify variables that researchers desire to test, selecting them based on previous research or anecdotal information resulting in a hypothesis. The studies evaluate progress that students make as a result of the application (of such variables).

While some of the studies implement particular variables such as the selection of an intervention program or service delivery approach, others identify schools with existing structures already in place. For such case studies, the results of student achievement, which is most often measured by the use of a standardized assessment, are examined. The examination determines if the growth demonstrated by students is substantial enough to be considered statistically significant, therefore, deciding its effectiveness. A 2016 summary of the evidence on

inclusive education reaffirmed the numerous benefits of such an environment, including the academic and social growth of children with and without a dis/ability (Hehir, Grindal, Freeman, Lamoreau, Borquaye, & Burke, 2016).

Information collected via qualitative methods focuses heavily around the perceptions of the people, supported by their data and experiences, in the organization. Data collection includes those that have a direct impact on the application, for example teachers and administrators, as well as those impacted by the results, such as students and parents. Surveys, observations and interviews, common data collection methods, were in many of the articles supporting the topic. Additionally, a comparative approach was frequently used. Numerous articles were studied to examine and identify the characteristics of high performing districts or those that have had success in supporting students with a dis/ability. Collective information was used to create a more comprehensive list, all sources of which contributed to the knowledgebase on the subject.

There are multiple learning theories that have been applied to the field of education, particularly through a historical critique of the work. These theories describe how information is received, processed and retained as individuals are going through the learning process. Intentionally, articles or books selected for this review fall into a wide range of dates. Because of the significantly diverse approach to education, and in particular the philosophy of education for students with a dis/ability, it is appropriate to consider both historical and current work so as to provide a comprehensive look at journey of special education practices.

A systematic approach in providing instruction to students is vastly different from earlier education models, which frequently viewed students with academic needs through a lens of deficiency. The challenge, presumably, in educational equity is establishing instructional beliefs and approaches that are not necessarily purist to a theory. Trent et al. (1998) suggest that special

education staff strategically must integrate multiple components of instructional models, driven by the needs of each student. An individual approach is the key to instructing all students, both with and without a dis/ability, as opposed to attempting to norm students to a predetermined set of expectations (Artiles, 2015; Tomlinson, 2004; Waitoller & Artiles, 2013)

With this information in mind, how do research methods and approaches taken over time compare to the framework being applied? It would appear that as theories of learning have developed, so have the different approaches to studying and understanding what is taking place in the educational field. For those working to identify the impact on student achievement, researchers should conduct a quantitative study to examine what role particular variables play in student learning and academic success. Those studies that have already identified an approach as being successful will be able to gather information that may be difficult to quantify. For example, while one could use coding methods to give numerical value to human responses, the story of the individual cannot be fully conveyed. For this reason, I believe that the use of a qualitative method of a single case study is more desirable, in that it will allow a variety of methods for gathering information to be utilized and a more complete story told.

Practical and Scholarly Significance

In attempting to deepen the pool of information surrounding educational equity, while answering the research questions, how do teachers and administrators, in a district implementing inclusive education, conceptualize students with dis/abilities and what effects does it have on their practice as educators, both practical and scholarly significance are addressed. This results from an understanding that despite years of research and attempts at meeting student needs, not only do gaps in educational equity continue to exist, but the results of such gaps create a social injustice pervasive throughout the greater society, with long-term impacts. Facilitating structures

that reduce the success of children within an academic setting creates larger limitations for life, resulting in decreased graduation rates, decreased employment rates/history, and in some cases, increased rates of incarceration. There remains a moral obligation for all educators to identify and apply strategies to close such gaps. The purpose of this study is to analyze one school's experience as they work towards educational equity, answering the questions of how teachers and administrators conceptualize students with dis/abilities, and what effect this has on their practice as educators, with the hopes that steps they've taken can be considered for other schools and districts facing similar discrepancies.

While the practical significance of the research is undeniable, it is also closely tied to the scholarly significance of the work being done. Recognizing the steps that need to be taken within an educational system merely is the initial stage of addressing educational equity. Equally important is preparation in the form of pre-service and other programs for teachers and administrators, as well as policy development at federal and state levels. Each of the aforementioned relies heavily on the work of research to deal with complex issues impacting society.

Researchers, along with school and government leaders, must continue to strive for more socially just and equitable schools. This is not only an important step for the individuals within the process, but also for society as a whole. I believe that learning opportunities and educational systems can afford positive change, and it is the responsibility of educators to ensure that all children have access to an education that enables them to reach their full potential.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Research strategies applied in this study were heavily influenced by the work of Yin. Yin (1981, 2009) defines a case study as an inquiry that (a) investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when (b) the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which (c) multiple sources of evidence are used. The existence of disparity in educational equity among marginalized groups may be historical; however, it remains both a contemporary and ongoing phenomenon within the context of education, and ultimately the impact education has on an individual's future success. It can be difficult to tease apart the exact cause of a phenomenon such as equity of education, particularly given the variety of influences in the public education system (e.g. staffing numbers, knowledge, curriculum, etc.). This is another reason for considering such a research path, for Yin (1989) further suggests that the extent of control a researcher has over actual behavioral events may be a condition in electing to conduct a case study. A niche for case studies, similar to this proposal, is to examine contemporary events in which behavior of the people or systems at the center of the problem cannot be easily manipulated (Yin, 1989).

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the methodological strategies and analytical procedures used to complete this research study. The chapter is organized into five sections: (a) brief summary of the problem being studied and research questions being examined; (b) summary of critical dis/ability theory; (c) description of the study design, including site selection, interview techniques, data collection and analysis; (d) credibility in process, with a discussion of the researcher's role and positionality statement; and (e) conclusion. Each section details the methodology of researching and writing this qualitative case study.

Overview of the Problem Being Studied

The American education system has historically demonstrated, with limited success, attempts to close inequities existing between student demographic groups. Regardless of an evolution of laws, curriculum, and instructional approaches, extensive disparities not only exist, but continue to cause detrimental effects on students' educational careers and socioeconomic success in society (Ansell, 2011). This reflection on history is essential, for as Frattura and Capper (2017) state:

> Dialogue regarding educational history has the unique ability to assist all educators in understanding our often unintentional and sometimes intentional practices of marginalization, and the effectiveness or more commonly the lack of effectiveness of such practices. Educators are better able to intentionally interrupt deficit-based practices, which have evolved over more than 200 years, when educators have engaged in a dialogue of how the practices were created, why they were created, and the data and research behind such practices. (www.icsequity.org School Module 1)

As schools nationwide struggle to close opportunity gaps for marginalized students, researchers continually examine systems for effectiveness, with the aspiration of identifying high-yield practices and strategies that disrupt inequities. The reality is that all students must be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful in a diverse global society. The delivery of special education services has evolved beyond inclusion, and as such, identifying and sharing success stories of any school is a valuable addition to the literature. This study, defined by the implementation of systematic changes, is driven by the overarching research questions: how do teachers and administrators, in a district having success implementing an

inclusive education model, conceptualize students with dis/abilities, and what effect does this have on their practice as educators?

In order to investigate these questions, a qualitative case study was designed using an analytical approach to examine the actions and structures of one school district that has witnessed a decrease in the academic gaps between students with and without dis/abilities. Their experience through the process of implementing system changes, and the meaning made from this experience, has allowed common themes to be analyzed with the purpose of understanding what took place throughout the process (and why), so that information may be shared with others seeking equity of education for all students.

The purpose of qualitative research is to produce knowledge supporting the comprehension of how or why occurrences take place (Shavelson & Towne, 2002). When exploring a dilemma or issue, qualitative research allows for action-oriented problem-solving (Anderson et al., 2007; Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research is most suitable in the study of human behavior, which is fluid, dynamic, situational, social and personal—all characteristics that influence educational environments such as schools. This study does not pose a hypothesis but rather poses questions that seek to be answered. While acknowledging that the work done by the selected institution has resulted in closing of educational opportunities for students, it is also important to note there are multiple facets of interest too complex to control (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2009).

Stake (2010) further defines research as "inquiry, deliberate study, a seeking to understand" (p. 13), and one method for creating such an inquiry may involve a researcher developing an "in-depth analysis of a case, often a program, event, activity, process of one or more individuals" (Creswell, 2014, p. 14). Additionally, the use of qualitative inquiry, and in

particular a case study, is a powerful method in social justice work. Conducting case studies challenges us to question our own mental models by examining situations and "reconsidering old ways of thinking in light of new understandings" (Gorski & Pothini, 2018).

Despite sharing commonalities with quantitative research methods, such as reliance on various forms of data collection and analysis, qualitative approaches incorporate careful reflection of the researcher's role and the theoretical lens through which they view their work (Creswell, 2014). Creswell (2014) goes on to state, "this lens becomes a transformative perspective that shapes the types of questions asked, informs how data are collected and analyzed, and provides a call for action or change" (p. 64).

Theoretical Framework: Critical Dis/ability Theory

Critical dis/ability theory operates from a model of social construct, versus the historical medicalization model of diagnosing an individual, often with the intention of attempting to 'fix the dis/ability' (Bartlett & Rice, 2019; Hehir, 2007; Hosking, 2008; Reid & Valle, 2004). Critical dis/ability theorists maintain that what actually disables an individual is the environment around them, and not the cognitive or physical differences (Campbell, 2013, Goodley, Lawthorm, Liddiard, & Runsick-Cole, 2019; Hosking, 2008; Kalyanpur & Harry, 2004; Love & Beneke, 2021; Mou & Albagmi, 2023; Reid & Valle, 2004; Rocco, 2005; Tremaine, 2005). The foundation of critical theory is the conflicting relationship between social classes, and critical dis/ability theory is a methodology focused on "analyzing disability as a cultural, historical, relative, social, and political phenomenon" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2019). The subject matter is not the actual variations in humans, but rather the *meaning* we make of such variations (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2004; Linton, 1998; Mou & Albagmi, 2023). Bredo (2006) explains that critical theory "refers to a wider range of scholarship critical of existing economic,

social, or political arrangements" (p. 23), and the ways in which power is infused into said arrangements. When examining viewpoints on dis/ability, the historical medicalization model identified and labeled deficits or problematic traits within individuals (Back et al., 2016; Cologon, 2016; Goodley, 2013; Phelan, 2011), whereas critical dis/ability theory recognizes individual differences in relation to cultural practices, and asks "at what point does a physical anomaly become a disability and who decides – the individual or society – when one is a person with a disability and a member of that particular minority group?" (Rocco, 2005, n.p.). Reid and Valle (2004) recall a Vygotsky sentiment from over 100 years ago, in that "a cognitive-physical difference is just a difference until we make it a problem" (p. 467). Critics of more traditional models of examining dis/ability have even gone as far as claiming that, by emphasizing impairments as the cause of dis/ability, people are in fact victim-blaming (Back et al., 2016). Perhaps more directly stated,

> A line that is focused upon what children with disabilities cannot do, instead of emphasizing that their strengths are and what unique abilities they possess…DisCrit questions how this line is drawn, how it has changed over time for a variety of types of disabilities, who has the control over this line, and what effects the line produces in education and in society (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 10).

A focus on individualism is not a new concept within the realm of education. Dudley-Marling (2004) has identified individualism as a "dominant motif in American culture" (p. 483), further stating that "our commitment to individualism has also persuaded us that vocational, social, and educational success (and failure) can be usually traced to individual effort and ability" (p. 483). Therefore, those that are unable to perform within the realm of what society has deemed normal may be viewed as "lazy and incompetent" (Procknow et al., 2017, p. 365). This

pervasively negative attitude about dis/ability has come to be known as ableism. “Ableism is the belief that being without a disability, impairment, or chronic illness is the norm” (Procknow et al., p. 362), the discrimination against the dis/abled. Ableism theorists describe it as “the compulsory preference for non-disability” (Friedman & Owen, 2017). Along with ableism is the belief held by some that people without dis/abilities are inherently superior because of assumptions made regarding individual intellectual or physical capabilities (Bogart & Dunn, 2019; Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Hehir, 2007; Phelan, 2011). Critical dis/ability theory examines power and privilege by acknowledging who (which group) is valued and who is marginalized. Instead of recognizing and responding to the continuum of natural variation occurring in the human race, and creating environments to reflect such, it has been society’s approach to work within a system that elected not to respond to learner variance (Tomlinson, 2004). Artiles (2015) goes as far as to state “the designation of difference comes with consequences for those groups that impinge upon educational and other key opportunities; in short, being different heightens one’s vulnerability to injustices” (p. 1). As a result of this belief, the motivation of special education often becomes on normalizing and instructing children to perform in a manner similar to their peers, disregarding the modes of learning and expression that are more appropriately designed to the needs of the individual (Hehir, 2007). Reid and Valle (2004) also reference Dudley-Marling’s (2001) notation that “special education serves as a vehicle for preserving general education in the midst of ever-increasing diversity” (p. 468), in that those who are unable to perform as same-aged peers have an alternate option for receiving education that doesn’t impact those around them.

Although not the focus of this study, it is important to note that racism and ableism have also been explored as interlocking oppressions (Annamma et al., 2018, Annamma & Morrison,

2018; Bogart & Dunn, 2019; Connor et al., 2016; Waitoller & Thorius, 2016), particularly given the high disproportionality rates within special education for students of color. Historically the identification of persons with dis/abilities has been encumbered with ambiguity and bias (Artiles et al., 2010), resulting in segregation and further questioning the opportunities, or lack of, afforded to children of marginalized backgrounds. Scholars link this to social processes that contribute to entrenched inequities by both affording privileges (defined as the "unearned asset or benefit received by virtue of being born with a particular characteristic or into a particular class", Rocco & West, 1998, p. 173), as well as oppression, to individuals (Annamma et al., 2018; Phelan, 2011). Artiles et al. (2010) argue that due to the cultural assumptions schools are governed by, a child outside of the White, middle class, is automatically at a disadvantage, both for their ability to navigate the system as well as potentially bias perceptions the teacher may have.

Reid & Valle (2004) state that "if we believe the rhetoric of the American Dream, that schooling is the key to success and mobility in our society, the politics of education have become a matter of social justice" (p. 489). It is further explained that "because school can be seen as a microcosm of the macro-level society, widespread division within schools continues to perpetuate a society that is severely stratified in terms of socioeconomic class, ethnicity, and race" (Connor, 2005, p. 163). I believe that this is why the lens of critical dis/ability theory is so important. We must start by recognizing our own biases and privilege so that we can positively impact the environment we are creating. The idea of locating a problem within an *individual* detracts from any attempts at identifying and addressing systemic disparities that influence society's perceptions of differences. Dis/ability becomes the defining characteristic of the individual and this deficit is used to further segregate them from exposure to opportunities that

will enable them to grow alongside their peers. Critical dis/ability theory examines actions and behaviors through a socio-cultural and socio-political lens, and there are seven crucial elements of critical dis/ability theory (Hosking, 2008). These elements are summarized by the researcher in Table 1 and provided the lens for analysis of interview data collected in this study.

Table 1

Overview of Seven Elements of Critical Dis/ability Theory (Hosking, 2008), as summarized by the researcher

1 Social model of disability	2 Multi-dimensionality	3 Valuing diversity	4 Rights	5 Voices of disability	6 Language	7 Transformative politics
Dis/ability is socially constructed; described as an interrelationship between the impairment, individual response to the impairment, and the social environment.	Dis/abled people are a diverse population within any social structure, and are members of all other social classifications and there is often an intersectionality between one form of oppression with another.	For CDT being identified and identifying as a dis/abled person is central to understanding one's self, one's social position with its attendant opportunities and limitations, and one's knowledge of the world.	CDT embraces legal rights as a way to advance the equality claims of dis/abled people and promote their full integration into all aspects of society, while valuing and welcoming the diversity they bring to their community.	Listen to and value the perspectives of those that are living dis/abled lives versus thinking about dis/ability from an abled perspective.	Language influences the concept of dis/ability and can be inherently political and has a direct impact on social attitudes towards dis/abled people	Theory that is explanatory and normative. Policy response to dis/abilities with the understanding of the first six elements.

What is this notion of normalcy, and what are we perpetuating when we focus solely on helping individuals attain it? Our society and student populations are becoming increasingly more diverse. Is it appropriate to view one standard approach to teaching and learning as the answer, and to remove those that are unable to adhere to it, particularly when there is evidence that shows labeling and placement of students in other settings are no match for high-quality instruction (Tomlinson, 2004)? This study was designed to examine the perspectives of educators as they strive to provide educational equity to students with dis/abilities and their non-dis/abled peers. It was done through a critical dis/ability theory lens, which speaks to the intended focus and means in which the methodology has been developed. Minich (2016) states

"The method of disability studies as I would define it, then, involves scrutinizing not bodily or mental impairments but the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations" (n.p.). The research study aligns to this perspective in that it examines the attitudes and actions of individuals within a system, as well as how they influence the construction of a system meant to support a diverse student population. By approaching the study through a critical dis/ability theory lens I focused explicitly on how educator's practices are impacted by the ways in which they conceptualize children labeled as having a dis/ability, specifically examining the following areas: educational equity for each student, alignment of students and staff for equity, equity of instruction, and the perceived benefits of systematic changes and restructuring. It is my hope that this critical approach will deepen the understanding of systemic inequities as a result of the social construction of dis/abilities, and cause others to think beyond the dominant social norms, practices, and assumptions of education.

Study Approach

This research study employed a qualitative approach in order to describe one school district's experience in working to eliminate academic and opportunity gaps, that existed between students with and without an identified dis/ability, in order to create an equitable education experience for each child. The district selected for this research study has taken an approach to instructing students with dis/abilities that is aligned with components of ICS for Equity. ICS for Equity operates from an asset-based lens, focusing on a proactive approach to education rather than reacting to a child's inability to meet norms determined by society, and utilizing a systematic approach to eliminating inequities.

The unit of analysis for this study was one school district, with subunits being teaching staff, as well as building and district administrators, thus qualifying as a single case embedded

design. Case studies are used to provide a general understanding of a phenomenon using a specific situation (Harling, 2002), and this one in particular will examine one district's intentional selection of strategies, use of resources, and personnel, designed to interrupt educational inequities existing within their systems. Processes identified by that district may be of use to other schools attempting to close similar gaps and support student achievement, although it is noted that a single case study is difficult to generalize. Yin (2009) states that "case studies, like experiments, are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes" (p. 15).

Site Selection

Purposeful selection, which Creswell (2014) defines as the "selection of participants that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question" (p. 189), drove this study. As a result, it was essential to identify a site that had already taken intentional steps towards the process of reducing or eliminating opportunity gaps between student groups. This case study reflects a district that has engaged in the work of creating equitable learning environments for all students, made evident by an examination of assessment data between students with and without a dis/ability.

It is important to reflect on a variety of components when considering potential research sites. Dr. Elise Frattura, faculty emeritus at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and my advisor at the time, was consulted in order to gain a list of possible study sites that have successfully implemented a framework of inclusion. After considering greater than ten sites in the Midwest region, the one ultimately selected was determined to have a long-standing, comprehensive process focused solely on improving the educational system. Of those considered, this district has been actively working towards eliminating inequity for 12 years, and

has demonstrated success in reducing educational gaps previously existing between students with and without dis/abilities. This is evidenced through the district's participation at six national institutes for ICS for Equity, for which their presentation of data has shown a significant decline in educational gaps between student groups, as measured by academic testing. Although it does not align with that of a critical dis/ability lens, one measure of educational success frequently used for students is performance scores on standardized assessments, and this was no different here. In reviewing this district's state assessment results from 2012-2019 (data following 2019 was not included as the testing reports were changed and thus they are not comparable), it was noted that this district not only had an overall score higher than the state average, but they also consistently scored higher in the area of "Closing Gaps" (www.dpi.gov). While the average score (for this area of the report card) for districts in the state was 65.4, this district averaged 73.4. At the elementary school level, the average score for schools was 67.0, and for the schools represented in this study it was 72.8. Additionally, from 2015-2019 the studied district consistently performed above the state average of 14.5% (of elementary-aged students with a dis/ability scoring proficient), with an average percentage of 24.8% for the same comparison group.

A final factor considered in this site selection was access to the location. With a qualitative research approach, it is imperative to have access to those involved in the study. As a full-time principal, it was not feasible to have a distance greater than 100 miles away from the study site, although the method used for data collection ultimately shifted with the advent of COVID-19.

The Case. The site that I selected for this study met all of the above described criteria and provided me the access necessary to conduct the research while maintaining my job. It is

located in a Midwestern state that reports an overall student enrollment in public schools of nearly 860,000. Within the state 14% of students are identified as having a dis/ability, 6% as English language learners, and just over 40% as coming from economically disadvantaged households. Racial classification for the state includes 69.3% students identifying as white, 12.3% Hispanic/Latino, 9.1% Black or African American, 4.0% Asian, and 4.1% two or more races.

The selected district has an enrollment of approximately 5,300 students. The entirety of the district consists of five elementary schools (PK-4), two intermediate schools (4-8) and one high school (9-12). Student demographics for the district include 11.0 % with a dis/ability and 20.5% from economically disadvantaged households, 1.7% with limited English proficiency, 89.0% White, 5.7% Hispanic/Latino, 3.1% identifying as two or more races, 1.0% Black or African American, and 1.1% Asian. Subunits for the study volunteered to participate and include the current building administration (Principals), district level administration (Director of Curriculum and Instruction and Director of Special Education), classroom teachers, and building and district specialists/coaches (considered teachers under contract).

In 2011 this district hired Mary as their Director of Special Education, and it was through her leadership that they embarked on a mission to create more socially equitable opportunities for all of their students, making a conscious decision to incorporate more inclusive practices into their schools. Mary shared that following a social equity audit, which examined their current educational practices, the educators at this site began a focused approach to ensuring all students, and particularly those with a dis/ability, had access to rigorous and appropriate instruction (“Mary”, personal communication, February 19, 2016). These practices included transitioning students with dis/abilities from more segregated locations, including sending them to a school

outside of their neighborhood boundaries, to inclusive environments with non-dis/abled peers and training cross-categorical special education teachers to take on a co-teaching role. Of those that were interviewed, 3 of the 4 administrators and 4 of the nine teacher/specialists were a part of this district during that transition.

A review of documents, found on the district website, showed that in 2014 the district also began implementing a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework as their instructional model, a model that was made up of four components; student-centered planning, developing culture for learning, understanding by design and actionable feedback, and classroom design. Their approach was focused on addressing learner variability in a strategic manner, and incorporated the use of data to drive district strategic planning, building level goals, schoolwide learning outcomes, professional growth plans, and student-centered planning. One of the four components, classroom design, was also addressed in 2014 when the district implemented *flexible learning spaces* in their elementary schools. These instructional spaces were designed to support flexibility in learning and a technology-rich environment, allowing students to access information and express their understanding through a variety of means of expression. UDL has continued to be a focus for the district and throughout the years they have developed a UDL Summer Academy that provides training to their staff, as well as others in the area.

Data Collection

For a qualitative case study, Yin (2009) describes six different, commonly used sources of artifacts when collecting case study evidence; documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observations, and physical artifacts. I reviewed each of the six, considering their strengths and weaknesses in relation to the study, and elected to include documentation review and interviews in this study. It is my belief that interviews allowed me to

target specific topics, such as how educators at this site plan for the education of students with dis/abilities. Document review was included to provide insight into the technical planning that occurs onsite. Documentations used by the site are not created as a result of the case study, allowing it to be unobtrusive, however once collected can be reviewed repeatedly which brings value to being able to describe the process used at the selected site.

The remaining four sources of evidence were rejected for various reasons. Participant-observations would have required me to take an active role in the events being studied, which I felt left room for my bias to influence others. Bias exists in all research, yet it is the desire to minimize it when possible, and for this study it is critical that the focus be on what systems have been put in place resulting in a more equitable education for students. I wanted the focus of this study to be on what is taking place in the current environment, making archival records a less relevant piece of evidence, and likewise, because physical artifacts represent a tangible result of a study, I did not feel they fit with research questions aimed at educator beliefs.

My interest lies in understanding and sharing the lived experiences of educators, employed within an organization that is focused on providing educational equity, in order to add to the historical evolution of special education. I wanted to know more about how current educators view and intellectualize children that do not meet what society has deemed “typical”, and how they have adjusted their practices, systems, and environments to meet the needs of each child. My own literature review showed numerous forms of data and reports, but it was the stories of the people that I found to be the most impactful. As such, I selected focused interviews as a primary source for the research. Focused interviews take place over a shorter period of time and follow a case study protocol, but still take place in an open-ended or conversational manner (Yin, 2009).

Direct observations of the classroom environment were initially included in the plan for the methodology. I felt that seeing the instructional setting would provide a strong insight into the application of the planning and intentions of the adults. Unfortunately, in the spring of 2020 the United States was struck by the COVID-19 virus. As a result, educators were forced to make significant changes to the classroom environment, and visitors were not allowed access to the site during this time. In order to minimize potential exposure to the virus, all interviews were also held virtually using Zoom.

Data collection of documents for this qualitative case study utilized multiple sources, yet the bulk relies on individual interviews with educators. I conducted, coded, and analyzed four, individual administrator interviews and nine individual teacher interviews. While demographic data was not collected from participants, all presented as neurotypical, Caucasian individuals. Table 2 details the names, roles, and organizational levels of all interviewees for this study, as well as approximate years of experience.

Table 2

Participant Information

Educator pseudonym	Role within district	Years of experience	Organizational level
Danielle	Administrator	Greater than 15	District
Jackson	Administrator	Greater than 20	District
Sarah	Administrator	Greater than 20	Building
Bill	Administrator	Greater than 20	Building
Kendal	Teacher (specialist)	Greater than 20	District
Megan	Teacher (specialist)	Greater than 15	District
Cassandra	Teacher (specialist)	Greater than 10	Building
Lauren	Teacher (specialist)	Greater than 20	Building
Cindy	Teacher	Greater than 10	Building
Carrie	Teacher	Greater than 20	Building
Daria	Teacher	Greater than 20	Building
Amanda	Teacher	Greater than 20	Building
Jamie	Teacher	Greater than 5	Building

Along with the information collected via interviews there were several documents referenced during interviews, which were reviewed in order to seek reinforcement of any patterns identified through the coding process. Observations of team meetings and classrooms visits were eliminated from the methodology due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Interview protocol for both teachers and administrators are located in Appendix A and outlines the script used for interview questions. The first section focused on rapport building, with the second being main questions around the systems within their organization related to supporting individual student needs and creating equitable education for all. The application of a critical dis/ability theory lens during the interview process was intended to have participants reflect on their own beliefs of special education services, and the approach used within their district.

Specific areas of information collected included the placement of students (into classrooms), adult collaboration, and professional learning. These are three key areas outlined in

research that educators and researchers have evaluated in order to address the needs of students with a dis/ability (Fischer et al., 2003; Gartner & Lipsky, 1987; Massousmeh & Leila, 2012; Robinson, 2017; Semmel, 1991; Stainback & Stainback, 1985; Stainback et al., 1996; Vakil et al., 2008; Zigmond, 1995). Asking staff to describe their current practices for educating students with and without dis/abilities allowed a connection to be made between the steps they are currently taking to support students with various needs in their system to the beliefs they hold regarding said students.

Unfortunately, it is too often that a dis/ability label drives assumption about the ability of a child (Mendoza et al., 2016). The child is viewed as different, and thus, less than the others, for not meeting the societal definition of typical. The flexibility that a non-dis/abled identity holds for a child is so much greater than that of a child with a dis/ability, in part because of the lack of preconceived notions of what they are capable of. The act of interviewing both teachers and administrators was done deliberately in order to identify any gaps between what is espoused and what is actually implemented, allowing us to see if there are systems and structures in place that emulate the beliefs held by educators. Interview questions culminated by asking for participants to share their perceived benefits of the systems in place at their site and they were provided the opportunity to share any additional information that they felt was relevant to the study.

For all interviews I asked participants for consent to the interview utilizing the recording feature of Zoom. Documentation occurred via an informed consent form that was emailed back and retained throughout the study. Discussions were held in such a manner that data collection could be considered both accurate and unobtrusive. Transcription was completed via the Zoom transcribe function, however they were reviewed while listening to the audio recording in order to check for accuracy. The completed transcripts were also shared with participants to allow

them to make corrections, clarifications, or additions of the information that was provided. A password-protected computer will be used throughout the data collection process, with interview transcripts saved in a digital folder on the recorder. Files were also downloaded directly to a computer and added to a USB flash drive for back-up. Only the researcher and advisor have had access to raw data in transcript form, and no audio files were shared with anyone.

My first step in gathering research data was the individual interviews with both district and building level administration. There were four administrators included; two current elementary building principals, the Director of Curriculum and Instruction, and the Director of Special Education. Understanding the high demands on administrator's time, my goal was to conduct no more than two interviews, with a time allotment of one hour each. Engaging administration in the discussion was intended to allow insight into the purpose behind the work done, an area to remain cognizant of. While the desire is to learn more about the leadership approach this administration has implemented, I did not want to enter into the conversation with any preconceived notions.

Upon completion of administrator interviews I then commenced the individual teacher interviews, following similar interview protocols as described for previous interviews. Interviews were conducted individually, with consenting participants that met the selection criteria. Seidman (2013) recommends three segmented interviews that focus on specific areas; a focused life history in context to the experience, the details of the experience, and a reflection of the meeting. A segmented approach was selected to help answer my research questions by drawing out the experiences that each educator has had. I wanted to know what drew them to a profession in education, what their professional goals are, and how *they* define educational equity. This first section of the interview was aimed at the main research question, illuminating how educators

conceptualize students with a dis/ability. The second part of the interview allowed me to identify if/how these beliefs have influenced the work that they do as an educator. These are the lived experiences and details of how they work, both collaboratively and as individuals, to support student growth. These questions helped generated data on how educator beliefs influence the work done in the school setting.

The time constraints of teachers, coming from the nature of their daily schedule, was an issue that needed to be addressed while planning this research study. Although some (Seidman, 2013) recommend that three 90-minute segments be used, this amount of time represents a significant challenge for educators and had the potential to limit the number of willing participants, thus impacting the data. In order to respect this restriction, I decided to conduct one interview, lasting no more than 60 minutes, encompassing the first two points (focused life history and details of experience) with an additional opportunity for follow-up reflection interview. Although the length of time provided was a result of teacher time constraints, no additional time was deemed warranted for interviews. There was, however, some email follow-up from participants after they had the opportunity to review their transcripts. Interviews included open-ended questions, in order to prompt the sharing of information. Seidman (2013) suggests to "listen more, talk less" and that:

> While interviewers may develop present interviewing guides to which thy will refer when the timing is right, interviewers' initial basic work in this approach to interviewing is to listen actively and to move the interview forward as much as possible by building on what the participant has begun to share (p. 84).

At the completion of all teacher interviews a final round of building level observations was to be scheduled. These were also to take place during grade level planning sessions, for each

of the grades represented, with the intention of seeing the instructional preparation that teams engage in. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 restrictions these steps were not able to be included. Documents (e.g. meeting agendas) that were mentioned during interviews were requested, in order to analyze them along with interview transcripts. Documents can help researchers develop a broader perspective on the application of the work being done (Yin, 2009), although it is important to note that while these have the opportunity to further grow the understanding of the work being done, they must only be used in the context of the site.

The final component of data collection was the offer of a follow-up interview with each of the administrators included in the study. Although no formal, follow-up interviews were completed, there was communication via email allowing for clarification of information gathered during observations, as well as provide an opportunity for any additional information to be shared. It was the expectation that the use of varied means of data collection, chosen to create an environment that could be considered less threatening (Kruger & Casey, 2009), would result in participants being more willing to share thoughts and perceptions about the systematic changes their organization has gone through in their quest for educational equity.

Table 3

Summarization of Data Collection Schedule

Data Collection Schedule

Week 1-2
• Administrative interviews
  ○ Director of Special Education
  ○ Director of Curriculum & Instruction
  ○ Building Principals

Week 3-8 • Teacher/specialist interviews

Data collected from interviews is considered mildly sensitive, as it reflects individual attitudes towards the topic of educating children. As such, information was coded and saved on a computer secured with a password. When not in use, the computer remained in a locked file cabinet, accessible only to myself.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the interviews a transcription (with pseudonyms used to provide confidentiality) was provided to participants, giving them the opportunity to review information collected. Digital recordings were saved on a USB flash drive, and kept in a locked file cabinet until completion of the study.

Transcripts were reviewed and analyzed in order to systematize and identify specific concepts brought to light through the interview process; a process known as coding (Creswell, 2013). Saldana (2009) explains that "a code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 3). He (Saldana, 2009) further states that "coding is not just labeling, it is *linking*" (p. 8), and utilizes a cyclic process to direct from data to an idea by allowing the researcher to organize and group similar data into themes that share characteristics.

All transcripts were reviewed to identify specific categories for further examination. While the act of coding may be considered analytical, the theoretical framework becomes the filter with which data is perceived (Saldana, 2009). My use of critical dis/ability theory within the study resulted in me coding responses through a lens of social construction of dis/ability. The interview questions enabled me to capture and label how educators within the study perceive their students, and how this influences the structures they've put in place to educate them.

While I initially planned to complete the coding process with the assistance of Dedoose, a web application that will code the entered documents and transcriptions, I concluded that going through a more manual process would allow me to immerse myself more fully in the data. Two cycles of coding were used for each interview. The first cycle coding method utilized what Saldana (2009) describes as elemental coding methods, in order to build a foundation for analysis, with a second cycle completed to organize and condense the information into themes for further analysis.

I used a descriptive process to code the information gathered, as well as develop a thematic analysis of the data. Descriptive coding is an appropriate approach for initial qualitative research and summarizes the information gathered into an identification of the essential topic (Saldana, 2009); topics which become the content for analysis. Wolcott (1994) defines the primary goal of descriptive coding as to assist the reader to hear and see what the researcher saw and heard.

A thematic analysis method of qualitative research is used for "identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). This approach to analysis can be done through different lenses, for example that of a realist or a constructionist. A realist method reports on participant's experiences, meaning, and the realities of their experiences, whereas constructionist "examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). The constructionist method to thematic analysis for this research study will seek to describe the systems put in place at the selected site, as a result of the discourse and beliefs around dis/ability; participants were explicitly asked to consider how the structures that are in place at their district allow for the supporting of students with a dis/ability. Braun and Clarke

(2006) describe six phases of thematic analysis, which took place in the second coding pass, recognizing that these are to be approached in a recursive process and developed to establish a level of trustworthiness with the data being presented.

Table 4

Phases of Thematic Analysis

Phase	Description of the phase
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code
3. Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme
4. Reviewing themes	Checking if themes work in relation to the coded extracts (level 1) and the entire data set (level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis
5. Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme
6. Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back to the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis

Note. Source: Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87

Document review followed a similar coding process, with each piece being examined for relevance to the identified categories. It is recommended that when coding visual data, such as potential documents, the researcher code field notes and analytic memos that accompany the visual (Saldana, 2009), and this was completed in respect to educator role (e.g. administrators and teachers) and then overlaid to make comparisons. It is also worth pointing out that, although themes may come about with repetition of mention, fewer narratives regarding a particular theme does not necessarily dictate less importance (Saldana, 2009), and as such all should be reviewed carefully.

Credibility in Process

The process for data collection began prior to any research collection with an overview of the proposed study being reviewed and approved by the appropriate district and building supervisors. It was my intent to speak with four administrators, as well as all willing classroom teachers and specialists who meet the selection criteria of providing instruction and/or coaching to students and staff within the building, for at least one full school year.

A district level administrator reached out to school-based principals to provide information about the study, as well as a google document to explain the study and identify any educators that had an interest in participating. These names and contact were then shared with me so that I could contact them and determine the best time for an interview. There was initially some difficulty identifying an appropriate number of participants (my goal was four administrators and twelve teacher educators), and a revision was made to the IRB that included the offer of a gift card, however prior to this being approved the necessary educators volunteered and the change (which approved) was not needed. Interviews followed the protocol outlined in Appendix A.

It is imperative that research is conducted and analyzed in a methodical manner, ensuring validity throughout, knowing that "the assumption of validity implies that the interpretation could be queried and the interpreter would be able, in principle, to provide responses to those queries" (Dennis, 2013, p. 18). Dennis (2013) goes on to describe how one philosopher, Habermas (1984, 1987), has explored and applied three categories of validity to the social sciences. One category of validity is that of objectivity, or being the ability to arrive at the same result when utilizing the same methods. Subjectivity, another category, brings the influence of an individual's thoughts, feelings, and experiences into the study and the third category of validity

is known as normativity, described as “the extent to which people in a given community find the norms worthy of their assent (Dennis, 2013, p. 20). Furthermore, “validity must be conceptualized as the process through which people come to understand one another given the bounded range and flexible field of interpretations (Dennis, 2013, p. 21).

For a qualitative case study, validity can be viewed across multiple lenses, grounded in the experiences of all individuals who interact with the study. Dennis (2013) offers insight to such as approach to validity, describing it as “the catalyst that infuses the three domains and hold the three domains together” (p. 33), with these being understanding participants, understanding self (in the research context/experience), and understanding the nature and product of dissemination. While it is true that this study seeks to understand the experiences of the participants, my interpretation of the results (as the researcher) and how information is shared with the public is vital to establishing a credible representation of the data. This study is not an attempt to establish causality, but rather the describing and analyzing of a particular case of educators, at a specific site, during a particular point in time. As a researcher it has been essential that I remain open and honest throughout the process, with an intent of maintaining a high level of ethics for the process and my subjects.

Ethical Considerations

This study followed all university Institutional Review Board (IRB) procedures. Approval gained prior to the start of any research included written and verbal consent prior to each interview. It was important to me that participants felt empowered in their participation of this study, to share their voice and story, and as such interviews took place at mutually decided upon times that allow for a comfortable interview process. Participation was voluntary, and those participating were notified that they could discontinue or refuse questions at any point. There

were no anticipated risks for participation in the study, and those that could have arose were reduced by allowing participants the opportunity to withdraw at any point, or to have choice where it is possible (Seidman, 2013).

All participants were provided printed and oral discussion of the study's purpose, as well as the potential benefits to the school and individuals. Additionally, I requested permission to record their interviews. Participants were assured that responses are confidential and that only general roles (e.g. teacher, administrator, etc.) are used for identification. They were also given time to review the transcripts from their interview time, allowing them to identify areas for corrections, expansions, or deletions. This ensured accuracy with clarified content, as well as provided assurance to the participants that their message was conveyed in the manner that they intended.

Positionality

An additional reason validation is important is the potential threat of positionality. While not directly associated with the selected school or district, I do acknowledge my role of colleague, and disclose that I am working in the same field and the same general geographic region. It was important that my identity, as a white, able-bodied, female, and my role as a principal of a public school be disclosed to all participants. This is something that I have remained cognizant of as complexities can arise when researchers and participants have differing identities (Seidman, 2013), making the rapport building a critical step in the process. I recognize that it was my work in this role in education that led me to wanting to learn more about the topic. My personal and professional experiences have the potential to impact participants' comfort and reactions to interview questions.

It should be noted that while qualitative researchers are not to hide their personal passions for the topic they are studying (Toma, 2000), they must consistently strive for objectivity within the topic at hand and during interactions with participants. It is, however, important to recognize that research is often inherently personal, and that motivating factor cannot necessarily be hidden from those around you. It is because of this passion that it is impossible to eliminate subjectivity from qualitative research (Seidman, 2009). There may also be benefits to the commonality of my professional experiences and those of the research participants, therefore it is important to reflect on this information so that it does not taint the data.

Conclusion

Constructing new knowledge and applying it to classroom experiences is not only possible, but also necessary in order to combat ongoing gaps for historically marginalized individuals and groups. A critical dis/ability theory lens has been used throughout this study, with the intention of eliciting and sharing one school's journey in creating a framework for educational equity. Ultimately, this study has the goal of contributing to educational research around the closing of academic and achieve gaps that exist within schools, and specifically between students with and without a dis/ability. Individual's voluntary participation has been a critical component in defining steps taken and meaning made from the experience. IRB approved processes were followed and collected data was comprised of interviews and artifacts. Analysis of this information created a comprehensive qualitative study, with themes arising to support the work done; research modeled after the type which Denzin and Lincoln (2005) describe as "a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible" (p. 3).

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This case study gathered data from one school district, with the goal of better understanding the success of their educational model for students with a dis/ability. The district was selected based on evidence that the education students with a dis/ability were receiving reflected an inclusive model of educational with the intention of providing an education for students with dis/abilities alongside their grade level peers. Thirteen educators were interviewed, including nine teachers/specialists and four administrators, representing two different elementary schools within one district organization. All participating teachers deliver instruction to all students at the elementary level. Educators with the title of specialists (role falls under a teacher contract) also provide instruction to elementary students, in addition to providing support and training related to servicing all students to elementary staff members. This includes students with dis/abilities in the general education classroom. Two of the four administrators that took part in this study provide leadership for the elementary schools from a district level, while two administrators lead as principals for each of the two elementary schools, respectively.

In addition to data being gathered through interviews, related documents that were referenced during interviews were also part of the data collection and analysis. These documents included items such as "core belief" statements (Appendix D), a daily schedule example (Appendix E), a sample lesson plan (Appendix F), a district special education meeting agenda (Appendix G), a common planning agenda (Appendix H), and a school special education team meeting agenda (Appendix I). It should be noted that while the list of "core beliefs" was located and downloaded from the district webpage, all other documents were emailed directly from the interviewee that mentioned the documents during their one-on-one interview. Analysis of the

collected documents included a consideration of the extent which they confirmed and supported what was shared during interviews, as well as if there were any discrepancies found.

This chapter reflects the findings from an analysis of the data gathered from the one-on-one interview transcriptions and collected documents. Interview transcripts were read and reread in order to identify commonalities or significant participant responses; information which provided guidance for coding the data collected through this process. Initial coding resulted in approximately 13-15 codes which was then organized into broader themes. As a result of this coding analysis, five themes emerged that have significant supporting interview data and will be discussed in detail throughout this chapter.

Conceptual Framework for Data Analysis

Critical Dis/ability Theory (CDT) was used as the conceptual framework for this study's data analysis. CDT articulates the relationship between impairment, dis/ability, and society; with the intent to support the transformation of society so that persons with dis/abilities are equal participants and fully integrated into their communities (Hosking, 2008). The seven elements, defined by Hosking (2008) include: Social Model of Dis/ability, Multidimensionality, Valuing Diversity, Rights, Voices of Disability, Language, and Transformative Politics. Although Hosking's (2008) work was informed by the early research of Horkheimer (1972), more recent inclusive education research supports these components, as well as the benefits of inclusive education for students with a dis/ability (Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Bohman, 2007; Capper & Frattura 2009; Frattura & Capper, 2008; Kluth, 2003, 2013; Oakes, 2005; Rush, 2004). These core elements provided the lens when reviewing and analyzing the interview data, which resulted in the five major themes. Application of CDT as the framework for this study provides significance as it centers dis/ability and ableist assumptions, which shape the experiences of

student with dis/abilities, not just in society, but for the purposes of this study in the field of education.

Findings

This section presents the result of the data analysis of individual, semi-structured interviews, as well as any probing, follow-up questions, representing the dialogue between researcher and each interview participants. All educators interviewed presented to be white, non-dis/abled individuals, however no personal demographic questions asked and therefore this researcher cannot confirm this. All educator participants met the requirement of having at least one year of employment in the district being studied. The five major themes that emerged from the analysis are as follows:

- Theme One: Normalizing dis/ability - Early experiences with persons with a dis/ability impacted educator beliefs
- Theme Two: Equal is Not Equitable - Who's responsible for teaching students with a dis/ability in the general education classroom?
- Theme Three: Language Matters - Variability in the words used to describe students remains
- Theme Four: Coaching and collaborative practices help to maintain equitable education
- Theme Five: Strategies with a continuum of inclusivity were used to educate students with a dis/ability

Table 5 presents each theme, with any supporting subthemes, identified in the data. Commonalities and distinctions within administrator and teacher responses are included, and additionally, the table provides alignment to the main CDT element(s) most represented in the theme. The analysis results shown in the table indicate that four out of the seven CDT elements were reflected in some way across at least one of the five themes. Supporting data for each

theme will be presented through educator participant dialogue collected from the interview process.

Table 5

Overview of Research Themes

Theme	Subtheme	**Administrator** Commonalities	**Administrator** Distinctions	**Teacher** Commonalities	**Teacher** Distinction	Connection to **CDT elements***
Theme #1 Normalizing dis/ability - Early experiences with persons with a dis/ability impacted educator beliefs	Early life experiences matter more than professional ones	3 of 4 administrators referred to early experiences with persons with a dis/ability	One administrator (Sarah) did not comment on an experience with persons with a dis/ability	4 of 9 teachers referred to early experiences with persons with a dis/ability	Teachers with roles specific to supporting students with dis/abilities commented on early experiences with individuals with dis/abilities	CDT element #3 Valuing diversity
Theme #2 Equal is Not Equitable - Who's responsible for teaching students with a dis/ability in the general education classroom?	2.1 All means all	4 of 4 administrators referenced "core belief" of *All teachers will teach All students*	Three "core beliefs" were mentioned, while the other seven were not	8 of 9 teachers articulated a sense of responsibility for teaching students with a dis/ability in their classroom	One teacher (Amanda) demonstrated a more traditional attitude, appreciating support from the learning strategist	CDT element #4 Rights
	2.2 Proportionality drives placement decisions	4 of 4 administrators report students with dis/abilities are placed first, but not all in same classroom	One administrator (Bill) spoke of the impact staff: student ratios had on adults	6 of 9 teachers referenced data when discussing student placement into classrooms	3 of 9 teachers did not mention data when discussing placement decisions	
Theme #3 Language Matters - Variability in the words used to describe students remains	Variability noted in use of person-first language	4 of 4 administrators used person-first language in interviews	4 of 4 administrators demonstrated variability in the fluency of ableist language	9 of 9 teachers used person-first language in interviews	9 of 9 teachers demonstrated variability in the fluency of ableist language	CDT element #6 Language
Theme #4 Coaching and collaborative practices help to maintain equitable education	4.1 Building professional capacity	4 of 4 administrators noted there are coaching positions to support teachers	2 of 4 discussed coaching from district level personnel	8 of 9 teachers commented on value of the coaching experiences they participated in	No teachers referenced coaching occurring in common planning meetings	CDT element #1 Social model of disability
	4.2 Teacher collaboration for sustainability	4 of 4 administrators felt teacher collaboration helps with ongoing consistency	1 of 4 more frequently referenced growing teachers capacity through large scale professional learning	9 of 9 teachers found value in collaborative 'co-planning' with peers	One teacher (Megan) referenced continuing to build the confidence of learning strategists for co-planning	
Theme #5 Strategies with a continuum of inclusivity were used to educate students with a dis/ability	5.1 Universal Design for Learning (UDL)	4 of 4 administrators referenced UDL in terms of planning – lessons and agendas	One administrator (Jackson) described the UDL pillars used here	5 of 9 teachers referenced UDL as an initiative in the district	3 teachers commented on physical layout of classroom as part of UDL framework	CDT element #3 Valuing diversity
	5.2 Co-teaching	4 of 4 administrators referenced co-teaching as impacting staffing	One administrator (Bill) referenced caseloads and ability to co-teach	8 of 9 teachers spoke positively about co-teaching	One teacher (Amanda) spoke of the co-teacher as a benefit to her, providing her feedback	
	5.3 Intervention/ Enrichment Groups	2 of 2 building administrators referenced the use of intervention blocks	0 of 2 district administrators mentioned the use of intervention blocks	8 of 9 referenced an intervention bock positively	It was noted by one teacher (Carrie) that students wanted to work alongside peers and not be separated	

**Connection to Hosking (2008) critical elements of CDT*

Theme 1: Normalizing dis/ability - Early experiences with persons with a dis/ability impacted educator beliefs

The first theme in the data findings captures the impact that early exposure and experience with persons with dis/ability can have on normalizing dis/ability. Eight of the total thirteen participants (Danielle, Bill, Sarah, Jackson, Carrie, Jamie, Megan, and Lauren) described personal experiences in their life as having influenced their decision to be an educator, including having childhood exposure and experiences with persons with dis/abilities (either family members or peers). These eight participants each made connections to their early exposure having some influence over their desire to work with children with dis/abilities and/or to advocate for full integration of persons with dis/abilities into all aspects of society, including schooling (Hosking, 2008).

As part of the interview, participants were asked to describe their educational experiences, and many used this as a jumping off point for what drew them to education as a career path. Three out of the four administrators (Jackson, Bill, and Danielle) and three out of the nine teachers (Carrie, Jamie, and Lauren) referenced having one or more family members work as a teacher, something which influenced their decision to be an educator. Six educators (Danielle, Jackson, Cindy, Carrie, Megan, Daria) communicated an early realization of a desire to nurture and support others, particularly those with a dis/ability. Megan (teacher) describes her early experience knowing an adult with a dis/ability, saying "I always wanted to be the person that got to help him or be with him". Daria (teacher) also spoke of growing up wanting to be and educator that supports students with dis/abilities, stating, "all of the kids come with different, unique circumstances and no matter what it is we (educators) have to figure out, within these

walls (of the school), the best we can, how to educate them (students with disabilities) and make them feel like an equal part of the (school) community."

Two participants (Jackson and Megan) had family members with dis/abilities. Jackson (administrator) specifically discussed the value his parents placed on education for him and his sibling, regardless of differences. He shared "I just watched how my parents worked through school from my standpoint, my sister's standpoint, my brother's (with a dis/ability's), and the importance of it. All five of us were pushed to go on to higher ed." For Jackson's brother that resulted in a college degree in the area of his passion. Megan shared that she had a connection to an extended family member with Down Syndrome. She stated, "I was just so drawn to wanting to hang out with him and be by him". That interest, along with a long-time desire to teach, reinforced her decision to pursue a degree in special education.

Participants also shared stories of their own early educational experiences during the interviews. Danielle (administrator) told the story of when she was in third grade a child in a wheelchair was excluded from participating in the school play because she couldn't access the stage in her wheelchair. She stated "I vividly remember thinking why didn't someone think of this? How did we not think we were going to need to get her up here or that we needed to do the play somewhere else?" Recognizing this injustice and wanting to correct it for others was a motivating factor for Danielle to enter the education profession. Another participant, Kendal (teacher), told of when she was in a high school class learning about human development, and students in her class were each paired with a student with a cognitive dis/ability. Kendal reflected that this experience showed how much potential there was for such individuals, and fueled her desire to advocate for persons with a dis/ability.

Theme 2: Equal is Not Equitable - Who's responsible for teaching students with a dis/ability in the general education classroom?

All thirteen educator participants in this study, at some point in the interview, referenced information and principles found within the district's "Core Beliefs" (Appendix D), which are statements to intentionally ensure an inclusive and equitable education for all students. District "core belief" statements were developed by a collaborative group of educators within the district, and shared with all educators as part of their strategic planning process. These belief statements, once agreed upon by a district committee, were then adopted by their Board of Education and titled "Core Beliefs". Their purpose is to represent viewpoints of the organization, designed to drive transformation in the district and schools towards inclusive education. These statements are maintained in a document that can be readily accessed on their district website.

While there are seven district "core beliefs" outlined in the document, three of these seven beliefs were more prominently mentioned by all participants in this study: *All teachers will teach all learners*; *All teachers will collaborate to strengthen each other's effectiveness* and; *All individual learner needs will be met in the general education environments through flexible learning experiences*. The supporting interview data suggests that these three "core beliefs" have a significant influence on the way educators in this district view, speak about, and advocate for the students with dis/abilities in their settings. It is important to note that there was not sufficient data to support that the other four "core beliefs" are practiced or operationalized by educators in the district or schools being studied. The supporting evidence for the three core beliefs that are most commonly found in the data is presented in two subthemes: *All means All* and *Proportionality Drives Decisions*. Both of these subthemes speak to important concepts needed for students with dis/ability to receive an inclusive and equitable education: inclusion in

the general education environment, educators that take responsibility for teaching all students, regardless of differences, and proportionality representation of students with dis/abilities in all aspects of their schooling.

2.1 All means All

> *When we think about equity, it shouldn't just be able to access the separate, we should be able to* ***meaningfully engage****. And so, what that looks like for each learner could be very, very different depending on their needs, but it's that* ***meaningful engagement*** *in the curriculum and all learners together.*
>
> *Danielle, Administrator*

All administrators (Danielle, Jackson, Sarah, and Bill) interviewed in this study described educational equity as a way to ensure that each child in their organization had an opportunity for success in their future. Danielle stated "what that looks like for each learner could be very, very different depending on their needs". She clarified that their district's "mindset is all learners"; they "don't focus on 'this is how you meet the needs of learners with disabilities', this is just how you meet the continuum in your classroom." Jackson, another administrator, recognized their organization's focus on "providing what students need in the moment they need us" while acknowledging that this would not always look the same for each child. He referenced a concept of 'funds of knowledge', stating that

> *Funds of knowledge always comes to mind when I think about equity. Every student has some skills, every student has a skillset that will help them reach their potential. Every student deserves to reach full potential, so I think of equity as our responsibility to create opportunities for kids to get what they need. Their funds of knowledge and what they have as experiences, backgrounds, and supports is just different. And so, if our goal is for*

everyone to be successful when they leave our organizations or institutions or schools, everyone's going to need something a little different.

Sarah, a building administrator, echoed this sentiment sharing the importance of "creating an educational experience that fits each individual kid"; that there isn't a "one size that fits all".

Providing unique experiences for student's to experience educational equity requires educators to see and understand students with dis/abilities as individuals. Bill (administrator), spoke passionately about wanting to know every child and their personal situation in his school in order to know how to help them "achieve their goals, their aspirations, and that they feel a part of our school community." Educational equity for students with a dis/ability was a priority for him and carried over into the actions that he took. For example, when discussing the placement of students into classrooms, Bill shared "our students are assigned a number of matrices for how involved their services and supports are, and that is something that we used to help kind of drive our caseloads", however he also affirmed that "It (matrix number) doesn't come up in our conversations. Really, the only time it comes up is when we have a student coming in from early childhood." Bill also said "We know the kids so well and we know what we're talking about what their needs are."

In this study all administrators (Danielle, Jackson, Sarah, Bill) described the importance of knowing students as individuals, as well as using their academic data to ensure growth for all. Jackson and Bill (administrators) both referenced knowing each child's story, and the significance of each student being able to have an experience commensurate with their peers. They valued the diversity that was present in their student population, acknowledging that this came through in a variety of ways. Bill described it as:

I mean, there's like a cliché way of thinking about it you know, like education for everyone and everyone is successful and there's a place for everyone. But I just kind of like to look at it through lots of different lenses of equity, in so many different ways…It can obviously be around race or gender you know, but whatever it may be, are they having the best experience that they can have to help them grow and achieve what it is that they want to become or what they want to do? How can we help this individual achieve their goals, their aspirations, and that they feel a part of our school community?

Jackson believed it is the responsibility of educators to create opportunities for students to get what they need to be successful, even when that is something different than what another needs. Both he and Sarah (administrators) recognized that students may not enter with the same experiences or knowledge, but by knowing what they need, being flexible in planning for students, and utilizing the resources available to them, there can be similar outcomes for all students when they move on from the organization.

Eight of the nine teachers (Kendal, Megan, Cassandra, Lauren, Cindy, Carrie, Daria, and Jamie) that participated in the interviews also articulated a sense of responsibility for the students with dis/abilities that were placed into their classrooms; recognizing them as individuals with a variety of components that make up their identity. Megan shared that it was "always my belief that we all deserve the education we're entitled to and we need to figure out how to make it work (for students)". She expressed, "that all students were an equal part of the community, and that it was her responsibility to know them and what they needed in order to learn". Cindy believes that "every student has their own set of tools to be successful in school" and Megan shared her belief that educators have the responsibility to "figure out how to make it work" for all children so that they are able to access the education they are entitled to.

Jamie stated, “it is the adult’s responsibility to meet kids where they are at and maintain high expectations for them”, something echoed by Lauren, who shared:

> *I think it’s up to us to understand what kind of opportunities do we need to do to reach all students because just because you offer something to a student doesn’t mean that’s how they best learn, so I think that’s the tricky part of education, it’s just, how do you need those needs of all learners?*

2.2 Proportionality Drives Decisions

Of the thirteen educators that participated in this study, each administrator and teacher articulated a connection back to a core belief that represents the concept of proportional representation. This core belief is *all individual learner needs will be met in the general education environment with flexible learning experiences*. All four administrators (Jackson, Danielle, Sarah, and Bill) provided specific statements that could be connected back to this core belief and all interviewed teachers (Jamie, Kendal, Lauren, Megan, Cassandra, Cindy, Megan, Daria, and Amanda) referenced actions or behaviors that they directly reflect the concept of proportional representation.

Sarah (administrator) explained:

> *We **didn’t** take all of our students with special needs and put them in one class. We have done a lot of work around our non-negotiable ‘all teachers teach all students’, so I would say we follow a model where kids are placed in multiple sections within a grade level and it’s not just one class.*

Bill (administrator) stated it like this, “I feel like we have to really know how we’re going to work together with this group of kids that have IEPs”, and Danielle (administrator) shared that

they "try to think of the *natural proportions*" when making decisions about classroom placement of their students. She did also recognize that they "have a finite amount of resources", stating:

> *There is never a perfect situation, but regardless, this approach was a positive shift from the past practices in which students were not placed in general education classrooms, or even given a school assignment that matched peers without a disability.*

Multiple participants mentioned that class lists, which are used for child placement in a general education classroom, were modeled after the demographics of the school percentages for students with and without an IEP, as well as other student groups that may receive support such as English Language Learners. This is representative of the concept Danielle earlier described, known as "proportionality".

Both building administrators (Bill and Sarah) reported that they lead the conversation for classroom placement discussions, providing the ultimate decision on which general education classroom children are placed into, with input from teachers and specialists. They (Bill and Sarah) shared that they begin the placement process by conversing with the learning strategists (special education teachers) and give preference to students with IEPs, and design classroom placements around them. Bill considers "how are we going to group them or cluster them or not cluster them, like how is that going to go? We do that well before we work within the general population."

There are some teachers/specialists involved in conversations of classroom placement for students with a dis/ability, specifically those that have or do work directly with these students. Cindy (teacher) shared, "most of her students are in the general education classroom 95% of their day" and "they (teachers) use data to monitor student's success in the different environments (general vs. special education spaces) in order to adjust and honor their needs".

Teachers also consider the capacity of the adult, or learning strategist, during planning discussions. Carrie (teacher) stated "We kind of look at (each) students' needs because we don't want to be spread out all over the grades because it makes it challenging to plan". This adult view of planning is counterintuitive to respecting the rights of children with dis/abilities. When using a CDT framework, it would be expected that teachers would always centers the needs of each child. Another teacher, Lauren, describes this as a "collaborative approach" that requires "looking through a lot of those different lenses to find the best placement for students." Six of the nine teachers interviewed (Lauren, Cassandra, Cindy, Carrie, Daria, and Jamie) referenced different data points (such as report cards and assessments) that they use during placement discussions as they attempt to balance the needs of students within each classroom. Cindy specifically shared that they focus on determining the "best placement for each learner" and that "we look at the academic data, the behavioral data, socioeconomic, like we kind of look at the whole, like every different piece of data we can".

Data analysis showed that all four administrators described a similar process for a class placement that gave priority to placing students with dis/abilities first into the general education classroom. Participants articulated meeting the needs of students with a dis/ability first, while also balancing the available staffing resources to all learning strategists the opportunity to collaborate with other teachers. This view is a reflection of the CDT expectation of prioritizing the rights of children with a dis/ability. Bill (administrator) shared what he observed in his first year as principal, at a time when this staff collaboration was not necessarily prioritized. "My first year I saw these crazy amazing people but they were running around like chickens with their heads cut off because they were in all these different classrooms", and so he told them "We've got to do something so you guys can do a better job of working together with teachers." He

believes that when students with a dis/ability are spread across a higher number of classrooms it can be challenging for the learning strategists to support them, as well as difficult for them to collaborate with a higher number of general education teachers.

Theme 3: Language Matters - Variability in the words used to describe students remains

Ableism can be identified within a group or organization through the language used when speaking of persons with dis/abilities and their ability to be successful, and as such it was important to consider that which was used by those in this study. Although the interview responses were generally positive and maintained a level of support for students with dis/abilities, there was still the underlying view of students with a dis/ability being normed against the expectation for neurotypical standards. Language utilized by the educators in these interviews identified the use of positive words when speaking about students with dis/abilities but often times was superficial, rather than indicative of person-first and asset-based language, which is expected when honoring the elements of the CDT framework. Therefore, the evidence found in this theme represents the lack of consistency, fluency, and, at times, ambiguity around using person-first and asset-based language when speaking about students with dis/abilities.

Eight of the nine of the teachers (Kendal, Megan, Cassandra, Lauren, Cindy, Carrie, Daria, and Jamie) provided comments, without prompting, regarding the students they worked with when asked to describe a student that they have worked with in the past. Jamie spoke of her student, enthusiastically saying "She is incredible. She is bright and happy, but struggles to communicate clearly what she needs." Cindy demonstrated a recognition of student strengths and shared that her team planning "always start with the strengths of the child, what's going well, what do they bring to the table, and then move to concerns." Other teachers also spoke to

the value each child brings to the classroom, such as Cassandra stating “they are really loving and outgoing and really kind” when discussing her student.

However, it is important to recognize that although comments such as “incredible”, “happy”, “bright” and “loving” can be viewed as positive, they are not necessarily indicative of asset-based language. Asset-based language would require a deeper understanding of authentic academic and social contributions being made. Positive language, on the other hand, can serve the adult who wants to be seen as kind toward students with dis/abilities but has not yet fully engaged in knowing the genuine assets of the student, which is an ableist view. Amanda (teacher), unknowingly displayed language that represents a distinct deficit view of students with dis/abilities. For example, she spoke of her work in an urban setting by saying, “and bless anyone who teaches there; I feel like that was a challenge for me.” She also described the “environment that we were creating for him (student with dis/ability)”, when discussing a student, as opposed to acknowledging the system’s responsibility to change to an inclusive environment.

An additional component of language that was recognized throughout the interviews was the use of language described in the research as ‘person-first’ when discussing individuals with dis/abilities. Person-first language was intended to equalize descriptors for persons with dis/abilities by putting the focus on the person and not the dis/ability; the person is more than a dis/ability. There were numerous examples of both teacher/specialists and administrators in this study using person-first language, including Cindy (teacher) talking about a “student with sensory needs” or “student who was medically fragile”, Carrie (teacher) stating “a nonverbal student with autism”, Megan (teacher) sharing a story of her past and her grandfathers “brother with Down syndrome”, and Sarah (administrator) describing a “student with special needs”.

When discussing support for a child Cassandra (teacher) referred to “kids with IEPs” or “students who don’t have an IEP” instead of dis/abled or non-dis/abled students, and Kendal (teacher) discussed student programming by stating “students with significant disabilities.”

Although these educators verbalized the importance of inclusion of students with dis/abilities in the general education classroom, variations of the word “different” were still used when talking about servicing said students. Two teachers (Daria and Amanda) explicitly expressed frustration when they were not able to figure out how to make academic growth happen for a student with dis/abilities. Daria, reflecting an ableist view when talking about a child that she worked with (that had autism), stated “we can’t always get at what he knows”, and Amanda also shared her most challenging experience with a student was not because of the student’s behavior or ability, “but because we couldn’t figure out what made him tick.” These teachers felt a sense of responsibility for the success of their students with dis/abilities, yet still maintained that it was up to the educator to make this success a reality as opposed to creating a system that would allow student strengths to contribute to the development of an equitable learning environment.

There were also a few examples of language used that was less representative of person-first, including Carrie referring to students as “our intellectually disabled students”, Bill (administrator) discussing peers growing up, stating that “everybody was normal”, and Daria (teacher) saying, “I have a different special education student” when responding to an interview question. Despite some variance in its fluency, person-first language was more prevalent than asset-based thinking, when describing students with dis/abilities. This evidence indicates that asset-based language is not as deeply embedded in educator speak as one would hope, given that these educators have engaged in professional development that would include such training.

Theme 4: Coaching and collaborative practices help to maintain equitable education

The fourth theme that arose from this study identified antecedents as necessary for the sustainability of the work these educators did to create educational equity for students with dis/abilities. Structures for building and maintaining professional capacity in order to implement an inclusive model of education were discussed by participants. Common to building and maintaining the organizations commitment to inclusive education were antecedents such as training, teacher collaboration, coaching, and co-planning that are put in place with intention. These proactive activities for designing professional capacity are important to ensuring the physical, institutional, and attitudinal (together, the 'social') environment in the schools meets the needs of students with dis/abilities (Hosking, 2008).

An early antecedent to building capacity began with an intentional decision made by the district in the early 2000's was to move all of their students with dis/abilities to their neighborhood school; a change from their practice of sending students with dis/ability to a separate school with dis/ability units. Kendal, who was a teacher in the district at the time, shared that before the district changed their process of segregating students with dis/abilities she experienced some struggles to collaborate with some of the general education staff. Kendal did not feel as if those teachers had a desire or willingness to collaborate with the special education staff. Carrie, another teacher within the district, recalled informal assistance being provided to special education teachers when students moved to their new school, but did not remember any specific training or formal professional development being offered at the time. It was noted however, this began to shift when a new district special education director was hired. This individual brought a different approach to servicing students with dis/abilities, providing training to district staff and limiting the option of outsourcing student educational services.

4.1 Building Professional Capacity

Professional learning is a key component to maintaining an inclusive model of education as it provides on-going learning for teachers in building their knowledge and skills so that they can best meet the needs of every child in the general education setting. School districts provide opportunities for professional learning in a variety of different manners, and both sites engaged in building professional capacity of their teachers through guest speakers, trainings, summer institutes, and independent learning. The educators interviewed for this study described co-planning and coaching as a part of their district structures for sustaining inclusive education, and educators with titles such as Literacy Specialist, UDL Coach, and Learning Strategist.

Building Common Understandings – Training. Research has shown that when teachers receive an appropriate amount of support for professional learning, more than 90% of them embrace and implement programs that improve students' experiences in the classroom (Knight, 2009, p. 3). This site utilizes traditional professional learning days by building them into the district calendar. They also provide incentives to teachers for learning that takes place outside of contract days, for example, teachers are provided eight hours of compensation for mandatory attendance in workshops, independent reading, and discussion throughout the summer months. The district also provides payment for additional hours that teachers put in focused on a variety of topics; some being determined by district committees, groups of teachers, and/or individual educators. Topics for professional learning in this district are decided upon based on a review of student data and the needs to meet strategic planning goals, of which inclusive education is embedded into. Having training built into the teacher contract provides a clear communication that the district prioritizes the inclusive education initiative; they are committing to the model

through compensating and mandatory training. This appears to be an important antecedent to a successful implementation.

In 2011, when this district began their work to move to an inclusive model of education they provided training to all educators in the district through the Integrated Comprehensive Systems for Equity Institute (Capper & Frattura, 2011). Danielle (administrator) shared that in addition, the district hired Katie Novak (author and educational consultant on Universal Design for Learning) to come and train staff, emphasizing ways of "thinking about all of our learners from the beginning and designing their lessons to meet their needs". Kendal, a teacher, reflected that it was 2013 when the district began hosting their own Summer Academy, something that was attended by educators from out of state as well. Since this initial training, this district and its school sites have worked alongside at least one of the ICS for Equity consultants to sustain the knowledge and skills these institutes workshops provide related to high quality implementation of an inclusive education model. Research has shown that one-shot training has a less than 10% implementation rate (Bush, 1984), and certainly, it doesn't matter how good something is if it's not implemented.

Coaching for Sustainability. Coaching is a structure intentionally put in place by the district leadership of this organization with the intent of sustaining the implementation of inclusive practices in all classrooms. In this model coaches worked alongside teachers, giving guidance and feedback to their instructional planning and practices, in order to best support students in their learning in the classroom.

> Coaching is a form of professional development that brings out the best in people, uncovers strengths and skills, build effective teams, cultivates compassion, and builds

> emotionally resilient educators. Coaching at its essence is the way that human being, and individuals, have always learned best. (Aguilar, 2013, p. 6)

Furthermore, Knight (2009, p. 2) states that coaching offers "authentic learning that provides differentiated support for professional learning." Danielle (administrator) echoed this sentiment sharing:

> *In reality we know that the most effective and long-lasting professional development happen with students right in their classroom and they're learning side-by-side with the learning strategist or different staff members, our coaching, things like that pushing into the classrooms and providing on the job or real-time training.*

Bill (administrator) speaks to the value of literacy coaching when he says, "How can we help our literacy coach? Like how can we help them when they're working together with teachers within their classroom? How can we use our learning strategist? That is the best learning that can happen."

Teachers that participated in this study reflected on coaching in a positive way, particularly in the area of literacy, which is provided primarily by building specialists. Daria shared "there's always ongoing classrooms being coached in literacy" and Jamie (teacher) stated "our literacy coach is incredible so I go to her often to support myself and learning. She offers a ton of help and is my number one resource." Coaches (teachers) interviewed (Megan, Kendal, Lauren) suggested that this was an opportunity to build teacher knowledge and increase their use of high-leverage activities for instruction. They described working directly with learning strategists, having an expectation for them to take their learning back to their grade-level planning, essentially as a form of peer-to-peer staff development. Kendal shared that when there are new resources teachers "get coaching around it (e.g. Read & Write for Google Chrome)",

with the goal to "partner with teachers" and support their use of such items. Lauren also asserted "I wouldn't say it's (coaching) a mandatory thing, but it's something that we want people to understand, that everyone can receive coaching. It's not a punitive thing, more of a collaboration and co-teaching kind of opportunity." When asked about collaboration with staff, Megan commented "So right now, there's a couple of ways that I work with someone. I have been asked to do coaching cycles, which I actually really love and enjoy. And so, I'm kind of just doing were I feel like I have people who are really open to being coached."

Along with building coaching by the literacy specialist, this district maintained a UDL coach and low incidence coaches that provide focused supports to teachers working with students with autism and/or intellectual dis/abilities. UDL coaches have the charge of working alongside classroom teachers to implement the core components of the UDL framework which intends to meet the needs of all students. Danielle (administrator) described the role of the UDL coach as follows:

> *We also have a UDL coach within the district and she provides coaching and she pushes in quite a bit to some of those common plannings, particularly with our new teachers quite frequently and help them to see the scaffolds that can be put in place within their lessons and then, also, just kind of helping them with some of those principles around universal design and thinking about like removing some of the barriers.*

The views on coaching that were expressed by these educators align with literature that suggests when coaching is viewed as a strategy for correcting teacher behavior, a person may not be as open to the concept, however if it (coaching) is a part of the school culture, it is more widely accepted (Sweeney & Mausbach, 2018). Kendal (teacher) said "It's kind of, you know, just the culture. We're all going to be coached at some time and you sign up for when you want

to do that." Leaders were aware that building this type of culture requires trust. For example, Sarah (administrator) shared "We did have to spend a lot of time team building. And not just team building, but really digging into a place where staff are vulnerable. Like, here is my strength, here is my weakness, how does this align with your strength and your weakness?" Despite the time that it may take to establish this culture, coaching was identified as a way in which to support the environment and instruction so that it was inclusive to students with dis/abilities. The positive reception of coaching reflected in this data is an indicator that supporting educators close to the delivery of instruction has an impact on growing teacher practice.

4.2 Teacher Collaboration for Sustainability

Teachers learn from each other all the time, sharing lesson plans, assessments, activities, and ideas about individual students through collaborative structures. This site had two main approaches to teacher collaboration; *common planning* and *co-planning*. The first, *common planning* was a regularly-scheduled weekly meeting grade level teams had with the building principal and literacy coach, and the second, *co-planning*, was for teachers to meet with each other, designing lessons to meet the student's continuum of needs.

Common planning. Building-level administrators created a daily schedule (Appendix E) for each grade level allotting one hour per day in which students attended a related-arts class (e.g. art, PE, etc.), taught by a specialist for the content area. One of these days was reserved for a grade level common planning meeting, facilitated by the building principal and literacy specialist. The remaining time throughout the week allowed teachers the flexibility to meet as a grade level team, with other colleagues (building/district level), or as a co-planning team (e.g. learning strategist/general education teacher).

This site had an expectation that each building-level administrator would hold a weekly common planning meeting with their teams, however there was flexibility for them to design the agenda. Jackson (administrator) said “principals do have the autonomy to use their own structure, but we have been using Universal Design for Learning template to run common planning.”, describing this as a way to plan for a variety of student skills and needs. Sarah (administrator) echoed this statement, sharing that she felt these meetings were an “invaluable” way to plan together, stating “the grade level teachers have such an in-depth understanding of the curriculum, and then you have the learning strategist that’s bring in, like, their expertise of how you can differentiate. And we really look through a UDL lens or try to.”

Bill, another administrator, shared that these meetings (common planning) included “(myself) and the literacy specialist, obviously the learning strategists, and then the classroom teachers”. When asked if other district staff ever attended common planning meetings he (Bill) acknowledged that “sometimes our common planning will have to be somebody at the curriculum office coming over to talk to (us)”. He also described it as an “ebb and flow” of content, based on the time of year and what was identified through the time of the year (and what student data was available) and building level strategic plans. A teacher, Lauren, also commented that they “talk about engagement and how do we get kids engaged before we even talk about intervention, so the idea being, you know, making sure that everything is available to all students.”

There was a sense of responsiveness to these meetings, as educators were afforded the opportunity to work on areas that allowed them to support building goals and individual student needs. The structures for this common planning time were developed at an administrative level, and Sarah even commented “People would say I have high expectations on that (collaboration),

but we have set-up structures". There did appear to be attempts made to incorporate teacher voice during the creation of common planning agendas. Cindy, a teacher, described the structure for these meetings in her building as a way to "honor where teams are at and meet the team's needs." Daria and Amanda (teachers) also felt that there was choice in agenda items, and that their administrator would ask for input on where to go next in their planning. Another teacher (Jamie), however, described feeling different about this, sharing:

> *It's agenda-driven, but usually attached to our strategic plan that the district and our school building has. It's not always ran by what our teachers are asking for, it's kind of like a top down meeting. For grade levels it's more individualized for kids and we spend more time digging into how is so-and-so going to get that accomplished, and how are they going to meet that goal. So, we spend more time focusing on individual kids during our grade level time.*

Both building administrators (Bill and Sarah) reflected their use of student data and artifacts in common planning meetings to further common lesson design and curriculum planning. Bill shared that conversations among his teachers include comments such as "Let's look at our preassessments to kind of group them into different groups next week" and "What's the grade level, what do they need, and how do we meet their needs?" Jackson (administrator), who was previously a building principal, referred to the process as "planning to the edges", stating:

> *As teams are in their collaborations, we know in 45 minutes it's physically impossible to plan a unique lesson for all 20 kids in that room or whatever it ends up being. So, we talked about, if this is our learning intention, how are we going to help the most accelerated learner in that room be successful? What would instruction look like for them*

and then when we look at students who might be in a place where they're significantly below grade average in skill, how are we going to capture their engagement? What strategies would be used?

Co-planning. Although common planning meetings with principals and literacy specialists were discussed by both teachers and administrators, the other component, co-planning, was more heavily emphasized by the teacher educators in the study. Co-planning was often done at a similar time throughout the week as common planning (not on the same day), although it was certainly not limited to it. These meetings, at times, also occurred over lunch or even during a quick hallway conversation. Co-planning meetings primarily included the classroom teacher and learning strategist, working alongside each other to plan meeting the needs of all students in the general education classroom. Bill (administrator) revealed there was a more intense focus on "the specifics of the child" during these meetings, and the teachers worked at a "deeper level" to plan how to meet the needs of the children in their classroom. Cindy (teacher) met with each classroom teacher who had students she taught, as well as each grade level team, in order to plan. She commented:

We have a lot of team meetings, like I feel like my schedule is very, very full of meetings, but the work that we're doing as team is amazing because we're coming together so often to celebrate what's going well and then to tweak things moving forward.

Amanda (teacher) also articulated that this teacher time was "most impactful in planning for barriers that they could anticipate for their students." This collaboration was something that teachers genuinely felt made a difference for their students, as well as themselves. Daria (teacher) said "We really support each other" and "we try really hard to be respectful of each other and just work together the best we can", also stating that "it feels like we could never go

back." Cindy (teacher) also described the benefits of collaborating with colleagues to meet student needs, saying "In these teams we know it's so important to meet the needs of the kids, even if things are going well. You want to figure out what it is that's going well." Kendal (teacher) shared the impact these structures had on one of her students when she shared the story of a letter they (one of her students with a dis/ability) wrote regarding their experience in the classroom:

> *One of our students wrote a letter about their experience, one of our friends that was included in the classroom and it was just beautiful. It was like, yes, this is what it's supposed to look like, you know? We still had areas to grow in, but it was like, yeah, this is it. This feels good, this feels right. This feels like the way it's supposed to be.*

Both common planning and co-planning meetings provide an opportunity for participants to engage in problem-solving to address each student's needs. This was something these educators valued, articulating it as a preventative and an ongoing method of support. Cindy (teacher) shared these discussions can focus on "how to help the classroom teachers instill more practices within the classroom to help these (struggling) students so that it doesn't necessarily go to a (special education) referral", recognizing "it's so important to meet the needs of the kids, even if things are going well you want to figure out what it is that'd going well to continue that". This was reinforced by Bill's (administrator) statement of "They (teachers) all have the mentality of 'how can we serve all kids'? Everybody's here and how can I guarantee or help make all these kids successful?"

Theme 5: Strategies with a continuum of inclusivity were used to educate students with a dis/ability

The final theme identified out of the data dissected the strategies used to deliver inclusive education for students with a dis/ability, finding a continuum of practices being applied. There were three main components articulated as a part of this data: Universal Design for Learning (UDL), co-teaching, and the use of intervention/enrichment groups.

5.1 Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

The concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework that this district adopted in order to further their inclusive education efforts. Without eliminate traditional methods and materials by which students learn from (Wilson, 2017), a UDL framework encourages flexible designs that are customizable in meeting the needs of individual students (UDL Guidelines, 2011). The UDL Guidelines (2011) recognizes that "individual variability is the norm, not the exception" (p. 4), which is a core understanding of critical dis/ability theory. For those with a dis/ability, identifying as a dis/abled person is central to understanding oneself, one's social position (even with its opportunities and limitations), and one's knowledge of the world (Hosking, 2008). In schools, it is also important that educators acknowledge the necessity of (educators and students) gaining an understanding of self and its application to the learning process, allowing educators to see the students' dis/ability as an asset in the learning process.

This subtheme validates UDL as a part of the participants vocabulary, however, although there is some use of it, it is mostly articulated with a lack of ownership and certainty. Lauren (teacher) commented "We *kind of have* a UDL lens and look at what opportunities are available for all learners to help them understand and learn best", a sentiment reinforced by Cindy (teacher) who shared "Because *we're a district* that does Universal Design for Learning there's

an emphasis on meeting the needs of all students whether they have a disability or not." Cindy also shared:

The point the district I think is trying to prove is that 'my students' not just 'my student', and students are not just a teacher's responsibility. All students are all our responsibility and so we have a responsibility then to meet the needs of those kids, whatever it's going to take. That's kind of where UDL comes into play because there's so many different ways to approach learning.

Jackson (administrator) provided a foundation to his district's belief of the UDL framework as an inclusive education strategy. He describes their integration of the UDL framework as being comprised of four main pillars, summarized below:

- Pillar 1: "Know your learners" - Have an expectation for teachers to look at student data.
- Pillar 2: "Culture for learning" - Develop a culture for all students to be a part of the community.
- Pillar 3: "Learning Intentions and Success Criteria" - Design instruction for all kids to know where they are going, with clearly identified learning intentions that every student understands and knows.
- Pillar 4: "Classroom environment needs to be flexible for all learners to be successful"

Three of these UDL pillars were mentioned by other participants; which may be an indicator of educator's lack of understanding or fluency with using the framework. Pillars 1, 2, and 4 were described with more frequency, while the data was relatively silent on Pillar 3. Learning

Intentions and Success Criteria were outlined on lesson plan documents (Appendix F), however they were not discussed further in interviews.

Pillar 1 refers to the use of data to identify each student's learning needs. Participant responses reflect a use of data for setting district and building goals, along with informing individual student learning needs, as the UDL framework would suggest they should. Danielle (administrator) spoke to how student data is used at a building level, saying:

> *The buildings really look at their data very specifically, so like, right now in our building we're not meeting the needs of our boys. Like our boy learners are not progressing in their reading the same. We're going to study that, we're going to think about what we're going to do to figure out what best practices meet their needs and go from there. Or, our students with autism, they're not growing at the same rate.*

Bill (administrator), however, provided an example of data being used for specific instructional planning:

> *We just implemented the second year of Units of Study, so the next four common plannings are going to work on the small group book and, you know, take the data that we have around where kids are and then design lessons to work with them in small groups or individually. Sometimes it's based on our strategic plan, but like building those things you've already set up, like this is what we're going to do, third and fourth graders really working on writing and reading pre and post assessments and how to use the preassessment to really guide their instruction throughout the unit.*

This was reaffirmed in a review of a common planning agenda (Appendix G), which articulated a review of progress monitoring assessment data and student assessments for scoring calibration. Daria (teacher) commented:

We all gave a post assessment do let's come back and score together. Let's look at student data together and plan together. Making those decisions is something that you kind of do by yourself sometimes, and I always liked when we do it together.

And Cindy (teacher) spoke teachers' use of data to drive individual learning needs, saying:

I think because we honor each of them as an individual learner, whether they have an IEP or not. Some of these kids at problem solving meetings or just, you know, planning each week like 'hey, this student's kind of struggling with this. What can we do to strengthen that, because we look at each learner? I think it's made all the different in the world, all these Universal Design for Learning practices, and just helps to strengthen the work.

Pillar 2 of the UDL framework was described as how educators create a culture of inclusion for all students, or, as Jackson (administrator) describes it "a culture of expectation that every kid feels part of the team". Sarah (administrator) described the "sense of urgency" that she feels when she sees students are not being held to high expectations, and Danielle (administrator) communicated her desire "for every learner, no matter what your background, no matter what your needs are, to feel successful and to have the level of school that (I) had growing up." She went on to state that her goal was to "close gaps for every learner no matter what your background, no matter what your needs are, to feel successful and to have that level of school that I (she) had growing up." Bill (administrator) found value in knowing students and their stories, so that educators could create a place for all to be successful.

Daria (teacher) echoed these feelings, stating:

The heart of my life is teaching, and as you think about inclusion practices, you know the pendulum does this and that, but that has never changed. It's always been my belief and

the people I'm around, that we all deserve that education that we're entitled to and we need to figure out the ways to make it work for them. And I mean everybody. All kids come with different, unique circumstances and no matter what that is we have to figure out, within these walls, the best way we can educate them and make them feel like an equal part of the community.

Inclusive education assigns responsibility to the educator in ensuring that students with dis/abilities are able to successfully access grade level curriculum and instruction. Almost 90% of the teachers in this study (Kendal, Megan, Cassandra, Lauren, Cindy, Carrie, Daria, and Jamie) spoke to their beliefs about planning instruction for the general education classroom. For example, Jamie commented that "kids deserve to be with their peers and learn alongside those the same age as them; breaking down barriers is our responsibility" and Cassandra articulated that she believed school should be a place for students to build their abilities, recognizing "the importance of all students being able to showcase their strengths while receiving the instruction and resources to access what they need to grow, both academically and emotionally".

Another pillar of UDL that was articulated by participants (Bill, Jackson, Danielle, Cassandra, Kendal, Daria) was related to the physical redesign of classrooms to create more flexible learning environments. One part of this was redesigning environments through room arrangement and furniture options. Kendal (teacher) shared that teachers who elected to pilot UDL were given the opportunity to do a "room makeover" to change the physical space, and Jackson (administrator) asserted that their site has "spent a lot on resources building flexible environments, so that students that need breaks, students who need more movement opportunities, students who just need to recharge, can recharge in a manner without losing your dignity in the process".

Others also commented on the impact of the physical environment. Cassandra (teacher) referenced common spaces for strategy groups and a maker's space for students to explore, while Daria (teacher) described her approach to the physical environment saying:

> *Our layout really helps. So, there are two high tables that we push together and have a giant Thanksgiving table for learning. Lots of open space on the floor, little nooks and crannies in the back for kids who to want to be with an adult or you want privacy, or you're with a peer or you're by yourself. I mean, kids know that you have a spot where their name tag is, but when it comes down to work times or learning times, we might not be in our spot. We might be where it works best for us.*

While UDL goes beyond the physical environment, focusing also on the experiences that students are having while in the classroom (Cologon, 2013), this is also a part that was given consideration by this site.

5.2 Co-teaching

Instructional shifts were intentionally designed and implemented to ensure that inclusion was understood as a part of the district culture. One of the ways this was done was in the title given to teachers licensed to teach students with dis/abilities, and the spacing in which they used to support these students. Traditionally these educators are typically known as 'special education teachers', however Jackson (administrator) described their district's view on this:

> *I guess I look at something as simple as a special education teacher's title turning into a learning strategist, or the fact that as difficult as it was we removed the classroom that each of them had. They have offices, but they don't have classrooms and those moves were intended to help kids see that if they had a disability there wasn't a special education teacher for them and then everybody else had the other teacher. There are two*

teachers in a room and if we do our job right, which I think we have, kids struggle to know who, like is this person not for me?

Eight of the nine teachers that were interviewed (Amanda, Kendal, Megan, Lauren, Cindy, Carrie, Daria, Jamie) provided information about co-teaching and how the expectation has grown over the years. Data suggests that prior to all students with dis/abilities being placed at their neighborhood school there was not a lot of co-teaching done at this site, in fact Kendal shard that formal training for staff began in 2013. There is, however, evidence that co-teaching is viewed as a positive strategy to utilize by these teachers. Amanda (teacher) commented that "I would say that the feedback during that time (co-teaching) is the most valuable from my colleagues, like to find out if a student didn't get something or a whole group of students. We usually address it right in the moment then." Another teacher, Daria, stated that "it feels like we could never go back!", affirming her sense of buy-in for this approach.

In order to accommodate the district expectation of learning strategists co-teaching with the general education teachers, learning strategist's caseloads (or the number of students with a dis/ability being serviced by a particular learning strategist) is something that was monitored by leadership. All of the interviewed administrators (Jackson, Danielle, Bill, and Sarah) referenced the need for staff to have time to meet and plan, as well as implement those plans, and in order to do so caseloads must be intentionally managed. Bill stated "It comes from the top…we want to keep our caseloads really low so that teachers can do that". Caseload sizes guide staffing decisions, as well as influence class placement for students, and Danielle stated that they (caseloads for learning strategists) are kept low so that they can "be truly a part of those co-teaching partnerships". Bill recommended that learning strategists work with no more than two grade levels in order to minimize impact on the teacher's ability to collaborate and co-plan with

general education teachers, sharing "I know that when they're in two classrooms then that classroom teacher sees that they're not just someone running in and putting out fires. Like, this is somebody that I can really co-plan with and we can do things together."

It was clear that this was valued by those within the organization, as it was mentioned by nearly all interviewees, and prioritized from a budgeting standpoint. Danielle (administrator), who is responsible for some of the staffing decisions, stated "I think the teachers, the general education staff, feel really supported knowing that there's another body in the room to help them facilitate whatever those accommodations or scaffolds are that have been developed by the pair. They can help deploy those there." Teachers also recognized the importance of these positions, and noticed when this wasn't something in place. Jamie (teacher) shared:

> *This year our learning strategist is only in our grade because we have quite a high number of IEPs in the grade level. So, we got really lucky because she's here all day and we don't' ever wonder where she's at or any of that. We know exactly how the schedule goes because she follows our schedule. But in the past when I've had learning strategists that works in multiple grade levels it's usually just balanced by whatever block of time would be the neediest.*

Consistency in responses around co-teaching reinforce this strategy as one of importance to this site's approach to inclusive education.

5.3 Intervention/Enrichment Groups

In addition to the differentiated instruction that co-teaching allows during regular instruction, participants shared information about an intervention/enrichment block that was embedded into the school day. This was a 30-minute instructional time, held four days a week, in which students participated in lessons that were specifically designed to meet their individual

needs. For some students this meant they were getting enrichment to extend their learning and skills, for others it was a time for intervention to remediate skills, and finally, for some students with dis/abilities, this is when they received their specially designed instruction (a legal requirement of an IEP).

Interventions were mentioned by ten of the thirteen participants (Cindy, Amanda, Lauren, Jamie, Daria, Cassandra, Bill, Sarah, Danielle, and Jackson), with stronger communication of what this looked like and how they felt it benefitted students coming from those that worked in a building role (administration and/or teacher/specialist). These participants viewed the intervention/enrichment block as a positive experience for students, with data being used to determine which student receives what instruction.

Sarah (administrator) shared that "we create groups based off of what students need", and "all kids have access to the practice, intervention, and enrichment time, so we may have a student with a disability that is getting intervention from a classroom teacher, a student with a disability getting their intervention from a learning strategist, it just depends." These educators also felt this structure helped to avoid the stigma of needing additional support, as all were working on something. Danielle (administrator) commented that this block allows for "natural times" of the day for specially designed instructional minutes to be delivered because all students are getting something specific to them. Lauren, a teacher, put it "So, we're not going to find one curriculum, but then how do we make sure that we have that equity where everyone is exposed to it? If that exposure isn't exactly what you (the student) need, making sure we fill the holes that they do have." Intervention/enrichment blocks of time align with research that supports providing very intense instruction, particularly to students with dis/abilities, recognizing that there is diversity in learning. Hehir (2002) explained the minimization of specialized instruction

over the years as the emphasis shifted to inclusion, however he acknowledged that this specialized instruction helps children access grade level curriculum and to minimize it can have negative impacts on their achievement.

While participant's had positive experiences with the use of an intervention/enrichment block, there is other research conflicting this practice from what would be expected in an inclusive education delivery model. The concept of "pulling out" students for interventions was mentioned in the data by all participants, when we would expect that no participants would support a "pull out" model (Capper & Frattura, 2009). Cindy (teacher) stated:

> *Yes, we pull kids out for intervention. Yes, they're not always in the room all the time, but the amount of time they're in the room makes all the world of difference. They don't want to be away from their peers. When they're out of the room they want to be back with them because they know that's their home environment.*

Other participant comments disclosed that students were being "pulled out" into spaces that were not with their general education. Danielle (administrator) mentioned

> *There may be opportunities during independent work time where a learning strategist might be pulling them to the side or they may pull into a different space if the person needs help with their focus, but that's pretty rare. We try to be able to have that all happen within the general education environment.*

It should be noted that the use of the intervention/enrichment block did not automatically assume that students with a dis/ability would be receiving intervention from their assigned learning strategist. Sarah (administrator) explained that they "create groups based off of what students need" and that "all kids have access to the practice, intervention, and enrichment". Furthermore, she shared:

We may have a student with a disability that is getting intervention from a classroom teacher, we may have, you know, a student with a disability getting their intervention from a learning strategist, it just depends. We've had students without IEPs join a group you know that's flexible that does have students with IEPs, so they really do own that piece of like whatever that child needs and whoever has the expertise, like we'll just make it happen.

One teacher, Jamie (teacher) spoke about her desire to improve intervention/enrichment practices to ensure "intervention was not simply a step along the road to qualifying for special education services" and that in order to do this she felt that it was important to go back to the "very beginning and support (students) so you don't always end up in the *same spot* (special education referral)." Jamie's mention of the need for improvement is also an indicator that interventions may not be symbolic of the intention of inclusive education. This also speaks to the difficulty in "letting go" of false assumptions, such as, interventions can solve student learning needs. Interventions are rarely monitored for effectiveness, often not connected to the grade level learning, and often delivered by lesser qualified teachers, all of which are counterintuitive to the core beliefs of this district and to the research around inclusive education.

Summary

This chapter presents an analysis of data collected through an interview process of 13 educators, in varying roles within a single school district. The intention of this was to share their unique stories and perspectives regarding their work in creating equitable educational experiences for their students, specifically those identified as having a dis/ability. The data, which was organized into five themes, was analyzed through the lens of Critical Dis/ability Theory in order to respond to each of the four research sub-questions posed at the beginning of

the study, thus answering the overarching question: How do teachers and administrators, in a district having success implementing an inclusive education model, conceptualize students with dis/abilities, and what effect does this have on their practice as educators?

Participants of this study maintained a heightened sense of responsibility for instructing students with a dis/ability, respecting their right to an equitable education, and identified collaborative structures and inclusive strategies as a way to do so successfully. Educators shared their desire to ensure that each child in their classroom was growing and making progress towards their individual goals, valuing the diversity that students with a dis/ability brought to the learning environment. The emphasis placed on collaboration among team members created opportunities for students to engage in their classroom in a meaningful manner, and while students with dis/abilities were placed into the general education setting, a level of variability remained in the inclusive language and practices utilized by the study participants. In the next chapter these findings and their implications for inclusive education implementation and sustainability will be discussed.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The history of educating students with dis/abilities in American education is one of marginalization and exclusion (Capper & Frattura, 2009; Frattura & Capper, 2007; Noguera, 2019; Theoharis, 2009; Theoharis, et al., 2021; Waitoller, 2020, therefore the purpose of this case study was to gain an understanding of what steps a district, successful in implementing an inclusive model of education, took to educate their students with a dis/ability. The research-based inclusive education model this district organization adopted is Integrated Comprehensive Systems (ICS) for Equity (Frattura & Capper, 2006), of which components for the model were largely evidenced throughout the study. The main research question that drove this study was "How do teachers and administrators, in a district having success implementing an inclusive education model, conceptualize the students with dis/abilities and what effect does this have on their practice as educators?" It was found that early experiences impacted educator beliefs, as well as professional experiences, though those were found to be secondary to personal ones. A result of these early experiences was that educators appeared more open to inclusive education, with teachers acknowledged a sense responsibility for placing and educating students with dis/abilities in a general education setting, knowing that their instruction needed to match the needs of the students. Although the district focused on inclusive education, variability in the language educators used when talking about students with dis/abilities remained and the strategies used when providing instruction, demonstrating that this work is an ongoing process. To do this, educators collaborated in two ways, co-planning and common planning, and implemented strategies that fell on a continuum of inclusivity to educator students with a dis/ability.

Important to the analysis of findings and the discussion in this chapter is the critical dis/ability theory (CDT) conceptual framework and its application in examining the notion of dis/ability as a social construct developed by humans, the society we operate in, and the meaning we make of it (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2020; Bartlett & Rice, 2019; Hosking, 2008; Kalyanpur & Harry, 2004; Linton, 1998). This section will focus on reviewing these research questions, given the relevant literature and the results described in chapter 4, offering a discussion of the findings for this study in detail. This chapter includes a summarization of the conclusions from the analysis of the interviews conducted, as well as the collected documents discussed in the interview, and are followed by an outline of implications for future educational practice in order to promote equitable experiences for student. Lastly, considerations for future research will be offered.

Discussion of Findings

Normalizing dis/ability. An important, and new, finding of this study was how dis/abilities are normalized by those in the education field. This study found that interactions with persons with dis/ability earlier in life had an impact on these educator's decisions to work with students with dis/abilities, influencing career decisions and helping to normalize the concept of dis/ability for them. Their social and/or educational experiences with persons with a dis/ability resulted in an openness to an inclusive model of education, and in some cases, a driving desire to create changes to the systems and structures that they experienced or observed while growing up. These personal connections were a part of their journey into the field of education, and while not overtly stated by any of the interviewees, appeared to be a strong component of their identity; the aspects of ourselves that are most important to us and help make us who we are.

Historically, persons with a dis/ability have been viewed through a deficit lens, reinforcing a perception that there is one able-bodied norm that all should be striving for. Critical dis/ability theory defines dis/ability as being socially constructed and driven by comparison to what is deemed 'normal' by society. Goodley et al. (2019) affirm "disability is not a flaw, an individual tragedy nor a whispered recognition of another's embodied failing or shameful family truth" (p. 973). Beyond the world of education, it has been explained that:

> Our built environment, policies, and attitudes make little room for human variation. Instead, they are modeled on, and thus privilege, bodies, and minds perceived as fit, competent, and intelligent and thus devalue, stigmatize, and subjugate bodies and minds viewed as ugly, deformed, and incompetent. When individuals "fail" to think, move, act, and look in ways that fit expected norms, they are rendered as "disabled." (Wilson, 2017, n.p.)

As a result of the early experiences many of these educators had, their concept of students with a dis/ability doesn't fully align to the deficit viewpoint. While there was a recognition of potential limitations that came from how the education system was created, there was also belief that it was their responsibility to make the adjustments necessary that would allow every child to be successful. Deficits were the result of the policies and structures, not children.

A secondary component of this finding was, that beyond personal experiences individuals may have had, organizations still maintained the ability to channel the work and mindset of their employees. In essence, to address the policies and structures to best support kids. The site in this study worked collectively to create "core belief" statements, using them to establish a culture that valued inclusion. These statements provided guidance on their approach to professional development, staffing, and student placement. It also showed that this was an ongoing process,

demonstrating that significant time and effort must be given when changing systems and affirming that the work of change is truly never done!

Equal is not equitable. Research has shown that the more time students with dis/abilities spend in general education, the more significant gains of achievement are realized (Capper, et al., 2000; Capper & Frattura, 2009; Causton & Theoharis, 2014; Cosier, 2010; Justice, Logan, Lin & Kaderavek, 2014; Wehmeyer & Kurth, 2021), and in fact there is little to no scholarly evidence that shows any different approach to instruction works better (Bui et al., 2010). This district further supports literature arguing that inclusion works to support higher levels of academic growth, showing that when students with dis/abilities are in an inclusive model of education they make higher gains on state standardized tests. From 2015-2019 the studied district consistently performed above the state average of 14.5% (of elementary-aged students with a dis/ability scoring proficient), with an average percentage of 24.8% for the same comparison group.

A focus on placement in the general education classroom environment for students with a dis/abilities is indicative of the application of inclusive practices, specifically honoring the rights of students with a dis/ability (Hosking, 2008). It is, however, important to note that placement in a general education setting does not ensure the realization of inclusion, as literature tells us inclusion goes beyond simple practices and engulfs a belief system (Cosier, Causton-Theoharis, & Theoharis, 2013). Samoff (1996, p. 266) defines the terms, in relation to schooling as such:

> Equality has to do with making sure that some learners are assigned to smaller classes, or receive more or better textbooks, or are preferentially promoted because of their race…Achieving equality requires insuring that children (students) are not excluded or discouraged from tracks that lead to better jobs because there are girls…Equity, however, has to do with fairness and justice. And there is the problem…(Indeed) where there has

been a history or discrimination, justice may require special encouragement and support for those who were disadvantaged in the past.

Educators in this district placed students with dis/abilities into classroom placements before any other children and took care to ensure that there was proportional representation in classrooms to match the overall student population at the school. Additionally, there was an understanding that instruction in the general education setting must meet the needs of individuals, aligning with what has been noted in literature (Agran, Jackson, Kurth, Ryndak, Burnette, Jameson, Zagona, Fitzpatrick, & Wehmeyer, 2020; Hosking, 2008; Storey, 2007; Tefera, Artiles, Lester, & Cuba, 2019), and that it be provided by all teachers that support that student (general ***and*** special educators). Baglieri & Lalvani (2020) state "Differences between the ways people move, sense, think, communicate, learn, and experience and express emotion have been present for all of human existence" (p. 93), and results from this research revealed that these educators recognize uniqueness' in their students without allowing it to be viewed as negative, or to dominate their understanding of the child as an individual. Dis/ability was viewed as a *piece* of a child's identity but not the whole, a concept that connects to CDT literature stating "the purpose of Critical Disability Studies theory is to start with disability but never end with it" (Goodley, et al., 2019, p. 977).

Language. Educators in this study showed evidence of deconstructing views of dis/ability through the use of person-first language, however there was a variability noted in their application of language. Student differences were not articulated as a barrier to the classroom and it was believed that students with dis/abilities are to be educated in the same ways and locations as their able-bodied peers; however, the value of the contributions made by students with dis/abilities was not always clear and the language used when talking about students with

dis/abilities had gaps. Hosking (2008) reminds us that language has the power to impact social attitudes towards persons with a dis/ability, reinforcing the power of an assets-based mentality, and it was noted throughout the interviews that educators in this district showed inconsistency when speaking of persons with a dis/ability and the value their strengths brought to the classroom.

Although person-first language was largely used, there were instances when other ways of describing people, and even levels of ableism, were heard by all members of this study. Literature tells us that it is not uncommon for there to be ongoing changes experienced by society with regard to language usage (Best et al., 2022; Ferrigon, 2019; Gernsbacher, 2017), for example, even the terminology "achievement gap" can be associated with deficit language, as the comparison remains to non-disabled as the norm, and assumes that the skills and standards being measured are prioritized over others (Quinn, Desruisseaux, & Nhansah-Amankra, 2019). As such, this finding may support prior research. It may also call into question if the word choices used by participants is indicative of the place they are in on their own journey of understanding the social constructs of dis/ability, and the need for consistent work within the district to support individual's identity work as part of an inclusive model of education.

Coaching and collaborative practices. In order to provide equitable experiences for students with dis/abilities, the educators in this study collaborated with each other to provide supports for meaningful engagement, matching the literature on collaboration in educational settings (Kisbu-Sakarya & Doenyas, 2021; Kluth & Straut, 2003; Paterson, 2018; Solone, Thornton, Chiappe, Perez, Rearick, & Falvey, 2020). It has been stated that "effective instruction, particularly in inclusive classrooms, require cooperation, teaming, and shifts in roles and responsibilities for many school personnel" (Kluth & Straut, 2003, p. 228) and researchers

describe the initial step in a collaborative effort is to "determine the resources that will be necessary and the barriers that exist in meeting the needs of a specific community or population" (Cheng & Levey, 2019, p. 63). Human capital was a resource this site emphasized for sustaining their inclusive education practices. Case sizes for learning strategists were guided by the amount of opportunities for staff to meet, plan, and instruct together; allowing educators to complement and supplement each other's efforts (Francisco, Hartman, & Wang, 2020). It also resulted in the creation of specialist (i.e. coaching) positions within the district. These individuals do not necessarily work directly with children; however, their work influences the ways teachers provide instruction and support to entire classrooms of students (Aguilar, 2013; Knight, 2007; 2009).

While collaboration in education is not new (Cosier, et al., 2013; Devine, Meyers, & Houssemand, 2013; Finnerty, Jackson, & Ostergren, 2019; Strogilos, King-Sears, Tragoulia, Voulagka, & Stefanidis, 2023), one component of this finding that would serve to expand the literature is the distinction between the types of collaboration and how educators use and value that time. This site applied two methods, co-planning and common planning. Common planning incorporated coaching and professional learning into the collaborative conversations, while co-planning focused specifically on lesson planning to meet the individual needs of students. Both were articulated as adding value to the work of the educators, although the role held by the educator influenced which they felt was most useful.

Strategies for inclusion. Literature has shown that the attitude of an educator is an important factor in influencing the instructional strategies used to support a diverse group of learners (Cologon, 2013; Kisbu-Sakarya & Doenyas, 2021; Rechhia & Puig, 2011). The utilization of a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework has encouraged educators at

this site to plan for student needs prior to the start of a lesson, as opposed to responding reactively if a child is not successful with the content. It also utilizes technology as a tool for assisted-learning and a means to "open doors for student learning, communicating, and personalized supports in ways that were impossible in previous generations" (Wehmeyer & Kurth, 2021, p. 45). This framework differs from a traditional approach to planning that targets a skill in one way, in that it draws on the strengths that each child has to meaningfully engage them in learning. It supports the growth of all children from the start of a lesson through, versus after they have already failed (CAST, 2011; Cologon, 2013; Wehmeyer & Kurth, 2021; Wilson, 2017). UDL is an approach to planning that has been identified in literature as supporting an inclusive model of education by providing multiple ways of accessing information (Cologon, 2013) and was applied at this site.

Educators with different knowledge, skills, and backgrounds are guided to consider the value of a flexible approach and often apply these through the use of co-teaching (Rytivaara, Pulkkinen, & de Bruin, 2019; Strogilos, Tragoulia, Avaramidis, Voulagka, & Papaniklolaou, 2017; Strogilos, et al., 2023). This belief sees variability as the norm, again, valuing diversity, and something to expect and prepare for. A co-teaching approach was viewed positively in this district, particularly for the collaboration it allowed the adults. There was reference to getting feedback from peers, as well as the ability to provide additional support to all students within the classroom.

Despite a proactive approach to planning, co-teaching practices, and the use of a UDL framework, time for ability grouping remained a part of this site's daily schedule. Known as *intervention or enrichment* time, students received instruction based on their specific needs. This was viewed positively by the teachers in the study, and was articulated as a means for

individualizing instruction for all. This type of approach, however, does not honor the spirit of inclusion for students are grouped and divided based on need (Theoharis, et al., 2021) and literature does not identify it as a practice for inclusive education. Whereas building-level educators in this study articulated a high value in time to provide specifically designed instruction and interventions to students, the approach of separating students from peers can be viewed as an equity detour. The balance between meeting individual learning needs proactively (i.e. UDL) and responding through interventions is something that educators must be cognizant of when making instructional decisions. Gorski (2019) states "We should be instinctively suspicious of popular educational approaches that often detour us around equity with a deficit approach" (p. 60), something that an intervention/enrichment block strategy represents. As opposed to pulling students that struggle away from the group, ensuring access to higher-order pedagogy and curricula are recommended as a means to ensuring equity for all (Capper & Frattura, 2009; Gorski, 2019; Kluth, 2003).

Study Limitations

In this study there were several limitations that should be noted. One such limitation is the size of the participant pool. Although the selected district employs over 700 individuals, only teachers and administrators with a minimum of one-year in the district were able to be included. Coupled with this, there was limited interest shown at the start of the study. Adjustments were initially made to boost recruitment; however, these did not end up being necessary. It is conceivable, however, that with a smaller sample size the views represented may have changed if other individuals participated. It is also important to consider that participation was voluntary, and as such it is possible that there was self-selection bias in the sample. Participants that elected

to be a part of the study had an overall positive outlook on inclusive education, and this may not be full representative of the district's entire teaching population.

Additionally, the onset of COVID-19 occurred at the start of this study and led to changes in the methodology; specifically, the exclusion of meeting observations. Original plans included the collection of documents mentioned during interviews, as well as observations of collaborative meetings taking place within the schools included in the study. COVID-19 created restrictions to who was able to access the school buildings, and visitors were extremely limited. Interviews were able to be held via Zoom, however observations were not.

Implications for Practice

This study provides findings and conclusions regarding how educators that experience success in creating educational equity for students with a dis/ability conceptualize students, as well as the impact it has on their practice as educational teachers and leaders. Educator preparation programs, consideration of shared beliefs within an organization, and collaborative structures are three components that could benefit from additional consideration on their implementation for educational equity. Implications for practice derived from this research provide educators and educational leaders with a better understanding of where to focus their efforts in the ongoing quest create and maintain systems that support the education of students with a dis/ability.

Educator Preparation Programs

One major consideration from this research is for teacher preparation programs to reflect on the work they are doing to guide incoming educators. Throughout the interviews it was evident that past experiences impacted individual's professional decision-making and the work they did to provide an educationally equitable experience for students with dis/abilities. There

was, however, little mention of any effects that higher education or preparation programs had on those that elected to take part in the study. Only one participant referenced her post-secondary experience, while numerous others provided examples of personal or early educational events. Additionally, the research around educator preparation in relation to inclusion of students with a dis/ability and educator perceptions was somewhat limited.

Pre-service programs focus on developing the skills, knowledge, and competencies related to topics relevant to school education (Zen, Ropo, & Kupila, 2022), however, if these programs are responsible for preparing the next generation of adults to educate our youth they should also be equipping them to engage them in the reflection and practices that will have the greatest impact on the students they will work with. This is also a place with which to provide identity work for students, boosting their understanding of the use of language when talking about persons with a dis/ability. A study in 2012 (Ajuwon, Lechtenberger, Griffin-Shirley, Sokolosky, Zhou, & Mullins, 2012) examining the attitudes of teaching students, during their first and last class sessions of an introductory course on dis/abilities, reported an increase in positive attitudes towards inclusion. Ajuwon et al. (2012) acknowledged that when teaching students were given instruction on how accommodate students with dis/abilities, this is when attitudes raised the most, showing that it is possible to achieve. As such, if post-secondary programs are meant to prepare those that go out and impact on society by their interactions with diverse students, why were they not identified as being influential on educators? It would seem that a recognition of the urgency around educational equity, and its impact on people, is necessary. That, along with a heavier emphasis on the necessary skills to be successful in such an inclusive environment are logical next steps for the programs that are preparing those that will be teaching our youth.

Consideration of shared beliefs within an organization

Although personal experiences with individuals with a dis/ability were found to be a major consideration for the educators interviewed at this site, this study showed that even without such experiences the place a person chooses to work at can still impact their beliefs about educational equity and how to achieve it. Quinn et al. (2019) questions "how the framing of educational disparities affects people's cognition and how those framings may interact with people's background knowledge and experiences" (p. 486). In consideration of this, school leaders must work alongside their colleagues to develop and maintain collective core beliefs around what they value and how they will function as an organization. The articulation of shared beliefs, in this case around the responsibility of educating students with dis/abilities within the general education classroom, created an organizational culture critical to supporting the diverse needs of their students and was a driving force behind the decisions made regarding how educators work together. As shared earlier by Danielle (administrator), "We really talk about our belief systems and introduce the strategies and support. It's about our district non-negotiable and our beliefs of really educating all learners in the general education environment."

To that end, school districts should consider how these shared beliefs are maintained with current staff, as well as passed on to educators entering the system. Retaining and recruiting staff that share these beliefs, as well as creating opportunities for all staff to continually engage in dialogue around these is essential for maintaining the culture of the organization; particularly as new staff are hired and onboarded. Even with several interviewer prompts, there was little response to how "core beliefs" are maintained during staffing changes. Sarah (administrator) did state that "our district is very transparent and our belief of our non-negotiable (current "core

beliefs") it's on our website so if you even apply for a job here, it's there, it's an expectation", however there did not appear to be any formal structures in place to ensure that this.

Collaborative Structures

Finally, school leaders must consider the collaborative structures they are implementing within their building, in order to support an educator's professional growth and capacity, and how they will create a sense of shared responsibility for all of their students. Research (Aguilar 2013; Knight 2007; Sweeney & Mausbach, 2018) affirms that professional capacity is often built through the cooperation between adults, with educators being able to share their knowledge and grow with each other, in order to further develop their skills. Fullan & Quinn (2016) state "collective capacity building involves the increased ability of educators at all levels of the system to make the instructional changes required to raise the bar and close the gap for all students" (p. 57), and Sweeney & Mausbach (2018) extend this by commenting that "capacity building requires attention to both individual and collective practice" (p. 25). This allows educators the opportunity to increase their professional capacity, developing strategies to support unique learners, thereby allowing all students to flourish in the general education environment.

This study showed that there were two approaches to collaboration applied, and the two interview groups valued both but at differing levels. While the teachers spoke more frequently about co-planning, administrators often referenced common planning. Common planning incorporated opportunities for professional learning and coaching, while the co-planning was a more targeted approach to preparing upcoming lessons. It would appear that there is value in both approaches, depending on the outcomes an individual is looking for. The research around collaborative planning did not necessarily delineate between the different methods for this, so it

would behoove educators to carefully consider the purpose they have for teacher collaboration, and what approach will best serve them.

Implications for Future Research

Throughout the course of this study and discussion of the identified themes, several areas for additional research presented themselves. It was confirmed that the way in which we conceptualize people is influenced by those around us, the situations we experience, and the meaning we make of them. These include both personal and professional situations, and I believe, affirm that dis/ability is socially constructed. In addition to it impacting the ways in which people (with or without a dis/ability) are viewed, it also influences the ways in which people interact and respond with each other, the practices that educators employ when teaching, and as a result, the success that all children find in the school environment.

Four critical dis/ability theory elements (Hoskings, 2008) were addressed throughout this study (social model of disability, valuing diversity, rights, and language), however, there were three others that were not evident (multi-dimensionality, voices of the disabled, and transformative politics) and these offer the opportunity for further exploration. Educational policy (transformative or otherwise) was not identified for study in this case. Likewise, although there was criteria for the studies site selection, there was nothing related to the demographics of the district and/or community and therefore examining dis/ability through a multi-dimensional lens was not prioritized. Although general information was gathered around the student population, this was not further scrutinized. Finally, this study was developed to illuminate the voices of the educators in this district and share their experiences in inclusive education, however the perspective of students and their parents was not a part of the design and therefore is

lacking. Each of these three areas are considered key elements of CDT and could provide an entirely different perspective to the work being done at this site.

In addition to offering support for the concept of dis/ability being socially constructed, this study suggests that the relationship between society and culture exists on a micro level. People who interact are often found to share components of culture; including beliefs, values, language, and learned behaviors. In essence this organization functioned as its own form of society and not only created, but also maintained "core beliefs", or values, around how they conceptualized and engaged with students of varying abilities. One piece of this that was not explored in this organization was the voice of any students, but particularly those with a dis/ability, or their families; something that could provide a deeper insight into this micro culture. Given the age of the students it would be unlikely that they would provide input on things such as their classroom placements, but that is not to say that parents wouldn't have thoughts to share. These may come through in the development of the child's individualized education plan and determining where specially designed instructional minutes are provided, but this was not something that was included in this particular study. Additionally, the intersectionality of identities and impacts of social classification were not considered in this study, but offer much in the way of information to be considered.

A final recommendation for further research is a deeper consideration for how the standards for success are determined. The site for this study was identified, in part, due to the academic success of its students on academic standardized tests, something that is often guided through layers of policy and politics. From a critical dis/ability lens it should be asked who determines the level of standard for each grade level and/or area of learning, as well as how these standards are being assessed. If a child is not able to demonstrate their knowledge and

understanding of this standard, at this time and on this test, what does that truly tell us? This would also be a place to dig deeper into the application of UDL, as the research on this was not as robust as one might expect. UDL represents a planning approach that values multiple means of expression and representation, something that may allow educators to further explore the variations of what children know and are able to do. And finally, if we truly recognize and celebrate such natural variation among children, is it truly possible for one form of measurement to accurately quantify the success of all learners?

Conclusion

This study was developed to share the stories of educators creating educationally equitable experiences for students with dis/abilities, with the hope that these could be transcribed into practices that may create access to rigorous education for all children. Most notably the results of this study highlight the impact that the work we do now has on future generations. This is something that I, as a practicing educator, feel is an essential component to my job. I have the opportunity to provide children with experiences that include others, both similar and different to them. This study shows that these experiences will help guide their views on what it means to be considered a person with dis/ability, the impact this has on that individual, and how we view their contributions to society. It also emphasized the value that educators have in creating a learning environment and experience for their students, and the influence their own experiences have on the work that they do. Finally, the findings reveal that even when educators put inclusive practices in place, variability remains and intentional maintenance will be necessary for such practices to continue.

The United States has seen attitudes and beliefs towards others change over the course of history, albeit not always quickly, and the information collected in this study embodies this. As

people change the have the power to *create* change; yet each individual is on their own journey to understanding and accepting the diversity of our world. There are decades of practices of marginalization to address, and as such, it is critical to mindfully consider the ways in which educators and leaders can influence the individuals that they interact with throughout their lives. We have the opportunity to make each generation a more accepting version of the one before, and the power to create equity for all by influencing the experiences they have as they grow and learn, embracing the diversity that makes up our society.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Recruitment Email

Hello. My name is Jocelyn Sulsberger and I am a doctoral student at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in the Urban Education Administrative Leadership program. I am actively recruiting participants in your school for my study looking at educational opportunities for students.

Throughout a process of interviews and observations of classrooms and planning meetings, I would like to describe how schools are creating more equitable education experiences for students with a dis/ability; your participation will give voice to your experience.

The interview process will take approximately 60 minutes, will be done individually, and will be recorded via Zoom. There will be an opportunity for a follow-up interview, should that be needed or desired. Additionally, I would like to spend time in a team planning session at each grade level and review appropriate documents, in order to make connections to what is shared in interviews.

APPENDIX B: Interview Scripts

Interview Script - Teacher

Good morning (afternoon). My name is Jocelyn Sulsberger. I want to start by thanking you for your participation. My study is centered around educational equity for students with dis/abilities. Having recognized your school as one that has made progress in providing an equitable education, identified through standardized testing, I would like to know and tell your story. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. I would like you to feel comfortable with saying what you are thinking and how you really feel. The information shared here will be confidential, and names and grade levels will be withheld to protect anonymity.

If it is okay with you, I will be recording our conversation. The purpose of this is to ensure that I get all the details, while still being able to carry on an attentive conversation with you. I will compile a transcription of the recording, and it will be available for your viewing.

Interview Protocol for Teachers and Specialists

The interview process is designed to help me address the following research questions:

1. How do teachers and administrators conceptualize students with dis/abilities?
2. What effects does it have on their practice as educators? Including:
    a. How are students placed into classrooms, in order to educate students with dis/abilities?
    b. How do teachers collaborate, in order to educate students with dis/abilities?
    c. What resources, supports, and strategies do teachers employ, in order to educate students with dis/abilities?
    d. What benefits do collaboration teams believe exist as a result of restructuring to educate students with dis/abilities?

Section I: Rapport building

1. What was your educational experience like?
2. What drew you to the field of education?
3. What are your professional goals?
4. I am interested in learning more about how schools are creating more equitable educational opportunities for all students, but particularly those with a dis/ability. How do you define educational equity?

Section II: Main Questions

1. I would like to learn more about students in your classroom and their experiences.

    a. Tell me a story about one current or past student, identified with a disability, that stands out in your experience.
    b. What do you see as some of the greatest strengths and areas of struggle for students today?
    c. How do students access additional resources (adults, environment, resource rooms, etc.)?
    d. How are students able to 'get what they need when they need it'?
2. The inclusion of students with dis/abilities is something that has evolved and changed over history. What processes are utilized in your district for classroom placements?
    a. What role do teachers place in these decisions?
    b. What data is used in these decisions?
3. How do teachers and staff collaborate to plan for instruction? Please share an example. Additional prompting questions:
    a. What time is provided before the school year begins? Throughout the school year?
    b. Who is involved in these conversations?
    c. Are there roles defined during the discussion (e.g. facilitator)?
    d. What resources, documents, and materials are utilized during these conversations?
4. How is staffing organized in your building?
5. Describe your 'team'.
    a. Who is in it?
    b. What does your time together look/sound like?
6. Describe a typical day for a student in your grade. How does this potentially look different for a student with a dis/ability?
7. What resources are in place to support teacher's impact on educational equity? Additional prompting questions:
    a. Consider curriculum and supplemental resources.
    b. Consider instructional framework.
8. What supports are in place to support teacher growth? Additional prompting questions:
    a. What are some examples of staff (e.g. coaches, administrators) that support your work in educational equity?
    b. What kind of feedback do you get from your supervisor or colleagues?
9. What does professional learning look like in your district? Additional prompting questions:
    a. Before the school year begins?
    b. Who designs professional learning?
    c. Who participates in professional learning?
10. How do you feel that the structures we've discussed today have help support your students? Additional prompting questions:
    a. Describe the impact you have seen the work have on educational equity in your school.
    b. What has been the most challenging about the work that you've done to support educational equity?

Section III: Closing

1. Is there any other information that you would like to share that has not been addressed in the questions asked?
2. Is there anyone else that you would recommend me talking to increase my understanding of the service delivery practices used at your school for the inclusion of students with a dis/ability?

Interview Script - Administrator

Good morning (afternoon). My name is Jocelyn Sulsberger. I want to start by thanking you for your participation. My study is centered around educational equity for students with dis/abilities. Having recognized your school as one that has made progress in closing academic gaps, identified through standardized testing, I would like to know and tell your story. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. I would like you to feel comfortable with saying what you are thinking and how you really feel. The information shared here will be confidential, and names and grade levels will be withheld to protect anonymity.

If it is okay with you, I will be recording our conversation. The purpose of this is to ensure that I get all the details, while still being able to carry on an attentive conversation with you. I will compile a transcription of the recording, and it will be available for your review.

Interview Protocol for District/Building Level Administrators

The interview process is designed to help me address the following research questions:

1. How do teachers and administrators conceptualize students with dis/abilities?
2. What effects does it have on their practice as educators? Including:
    a. How are students placed into classrooms, in order to educate students with dis/abilities?
    b. How do teachers collaborate, in order to educate students with dis/abilities?
    c. What resources, supports, and strategies do teachers employ, in order to educate students with dis/abilities?
    d. What benefits do collaboration teams believe exist as a result of restructuring to educate students with dis/abilities?

Section I: Rapport building

1. What was your educational experience like?
2. What drew you to the field of education?
3. What are your professional goals?
4. I am interested in learning more about how schools are creating more equitable educational opportunities for all students, but particularly those with a dis/ability. How do you define educational equity?

Section II: Main Questions

1. The inclusion of students with dis/abilities is something that has evolved and changed over history. What processes are utilized in your district for the school placement of students?

2. What are school/district expectations for staff collaboration when planning for instruction? Please share an example. Additional prompting questions:
   a. What time is provided before the school year begins? Throughout the school year?
   b. Who is involved in these conversations?
   c. What resources, documents, and materials are provided to guide these conversations?
3. How is staffing, including therapists and specialists, organized in elementary buildings?
4. What resources are in place to support teacher's impact on educational equity? Additional prompting questions:
   a. Consider team planning structures
   b. Consider curriculum and supplemental resources.
   c. Consider instructional framework.
5. What does professional learning look like in your district? Additional prompting questions:
   a. Before the school year begins?
   b. Who designs professional learning?
   c. Who participates in professional learning?
6. How do you feel that the structures we've discussed today have help support your students? Additional prompting questions:
   a. Describe the impact you have seen the work have on educational equity in your district.
   c. What has been the most challenging about the work that you've done to support educational equity?

Section III: Closing

1. Is there any other information that you would like to share that has not been addressed in the questions asked?
2. Is there anyone else that you would recommend me talking to increase my understanding of the service delivery practices used at your school for the inclusion of students with a dis/ability?

APPENDIX C: Statement of Informed Consent Form

Research Procedures
This research is being conducted to explore and share experiences of a school that has noted a decrease in academic and opportunity gaps for students with a dis/ability, as a result of work around educational equity. As a result of the work your organization has engaged in, you are being invited to participate in this voluntary study. If you agree, you will be asked to participate in an individual interview lasting approximately 60 minutes, with the potential for a follow-up reflection. You will also be agreeing to allow observations of team meetings and the review of planning documents.

Potential risks and discomforts
This research should not result in any risks or discomforts to you, your organization, or to the public. In the instance that discomforts arise, you may discontinue participation.

Benefits for participation
There are no benefits to you as a participant, other than to further research in creating educationally equitable environments for children with dis/abilities.

Confidentiality
The data in this study will be confidential. Your name will not be included on any data collection documents and any information used for publication will not identify you or your school site. A final copy of the document will be shared with all participants. Recordings from the interviews will be kept on a zip drive for a period of seven years, after which time they will be erased.

Participation
Your participation is voluntary; you have the right to choose whether or not to participate in this study. If you decide not to participate, or, if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or consequence. You have the right to refuse to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering. If you do choose to withdraw from this study at any point, you are not required to provide a reason for doing so.

Contact
This research is being conducted by Jocelyn Sulsberger through the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. If you have any questions or concerns about the study, please contact:

Jocelyn Sulsberger
Principle Investigator
339 W. Seacroft Court
Mequon, WI. 53092
414-736-0437
tank@uwm.edu

Rights of Research Subjects

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) office at irbinfo@uwm.edu or 414-229-3182/414-229-3173

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered and I have been provided a copy of this form.

_____
Printed name of participant

_____ _____
Signature of participant Date

_____ _____
Signature of principle investigator Date

APPENDIX D: Core Beliefs

1. **All** learners will be held to high expectations
2. **All** learners will succeed
3. **All** teachers will collaborate to strengthen each other's effectiveness
4. **All** teachers will teach all learners
5. **All** individual learners' needs will be met in the general education environments through flexible learning experiences
6. **All** learners will engage in relevant curriculum that is diverse
7. **All** teachers will design instruction by knowing each individual

APPENDIX E: Daily Schedule

Kindergarten

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8:30	Morning jobs	Morning jobs	Morning jobs	Morning jobs	Morning jobs
8:45	Morning meeting	Morning meeting	Morning meeting	Morning meeting	Morning meeting
9-9:30	Centers	Centers	Centers	Centers	Centers
9:30-9:40	Read Aloud	Read Aloud	Read Aloud	Read Aloud	Read Aloud
9:40-9:55	Recess	Recess	Recess	Recess	Recess
10:00-10:30	Number Corner &	PIE	PIE	PIE	PIE
10:30-11:15	Reader's Workshop	Reader's Workshop	Reader's Workshop	Reader's Workshop	Reader's Workshop
11:20-12:05	lunch	lunch	lunch	lunch	lunch
12:10-1:00	Math	Math	Math	Math	12:15-12:30 # Corner
1:00-2:00	Specials	Specials	Specials	Specials	12:30-1:30 Specials
2:05-2:20	Balanced Literacy	Number Corner	Number Corner	Number Corner	1:35-2:20 Math
2:20-3:00	Writer's Workshop	Writer's Workshop	Writer's Workshop	Writer's Workshop	2:20-2:50 Writer's Workshop
3:00-3:35	Play/Content	Play/Content	Play/Content	Play/Content	2:50-3:35 Content/Play
3:40	Dismissal	Dismissal	Dismissal	Dismissal	Dismissal

APPENDIX F: Lesson Plan Document

Universal Design Unit/Lesson Plan for:
Grade: 3 Subject: Reading Unit: Biography Book Clubs

Learning Intentions (Big Idea/Enduring Understandings)

- I am learning to describe the person in my book.
- I am learning make connections between my person and the world in which they lived.
- I am learning to identify and explain the message or lesson that the world could learn from the person I am studying.

Common Core Standards and Extended Instructional Achievement Level Descriptors
CCSS/LS Standards Addressed in this Unit:
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.3
Describe characters in a story (e.g., their traits, motivations, or feelings) and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.3.3
Describe the relationship between a series of historical events, scientific ideas or concepts, or steps in technical procedures in a text, using language that pertains to time, sequence, and cause/effect.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.2
Determine the central message, lesson, or moral and explain how it is conveyed through key details in the text.

Reminder: Essential Elements correlate to these for students who are not at grade level. See lessons for corresponding page numbers.

Success Criteria (Required Content & Skills)
I will be successful when/ I can...

- Describe my person's traits, motivations and feelings and support my thinking with evidence.
- Explain the connection between my person and the world in which they lived.
- Share the lesson or message that the world can learn from my person.

Assessment/Summative Performance Task(s):
Is more than one option available/needed to reach all learners?
Is the assessment affected by other abilities (such as ability to read for math test?

Pre Assessment w/ Read Aloud

Pre Assessment Link
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1VN1LU1KBQRveokH7S42-05CDT4QHDI5C%428UdymlWs/edit?usp=sharing

Vocabulary/Key Terms: *Looking through the unit, what vocabulary do you anticipate students may struggle with? Are there vocabulary-building options for all students?* ***Add vocabulary to this list as unit progresses)***
Quotation marks, historical terms (time specific), biography, setting

Could use Flocabulary https://www.flocabulary.com/topics/us-history/ to teach some of the background for these historical contexts

Materials List: *What materials do teachers and students need? What level are they at? Do the materials allow all students to reach learning intentions?*

- Multi-media clips of biographies, articles, websites,
- Read Aloud (Ruby Bridges, Who Is Jackie Robinson, Wilma Unlimited)
- Graphic organizer for story arc - may need a new one for each bend.
- Cart of Library books
- Blendspace to match the unit?
- Links on Greenland School library page and OASD Library Page

APPENDIX G: Common Planning Agenda

Greetings,

We are excited for our 1st common planning of the school year.

We will **meet in your grade level commons** area this week. You will probably need your laptop with you.

Here is the agenda:

- Review decisions, reminders, and To-do's from Aug. 26 grade level literacy meetings
- Review updated RtI decision rules/data needed for Oct. 12 data day
- Review process/timeline for FAST assessments (please bring your CBM folders or FAST binders to review) and F and P assessments
- Review process/timeline for other reading and math assessments
- Review process/timeline for inputting data into Educlimber
- 1st grade-- please bring your student assessments and scoring sheets for My Dog Max. You don't need to score them beforehand, we will collectively score several student samples together. If you have already scored them, that is fine too.

Thank you!

Some agenda items for our common planning this week:

1. RAZPlus--Jennifer has some great new tips and features to share with you
2. Discuss focus and ideas for practice groups during HP
3. Explore Seesaw activities to support phonics

APPENDIX H: Special Education Team Agenda

Special Ed. Team Agenda Items

Friday, October 1

- Schedule for new student

Oct. 20

- [redacted] - FBA Update
  - FBA should be a full team process and done most often during an evaluation/special education (not outside of sped)
- EBD disability criteria changing Dec 1, 2021
- Power Day Doc- dates coming up, plans, etc (December?)
- Evals in the wings- [redacted] 4k pm ([redacted]), [redacted] ([redacted]), [redacted]? 4kAM, [redacted] 3, [redacted] 3, [redacted] 1, [redacted] 3, [redacted] 3, [redacted] 3, [redacted] 1, [redacted] 1, [redacted] 3,
- Disability/Difference awareness?? (International Day of Persons with Disabilities is Dec 3. April is Celebrate Diversity Month)
  - March/April after spring break, focus on inclusion and diversity of all rather than a specific disability
- [redacted] open 2:30-2:45?

APPENDIX I: Learning Strategist Agenda

Thursday, December 16
1:45 pm-3:45 pm - East Campus Board Room

1:45: K-6th Grade Math Assessment Practices

- Number Corner
- Unit Pre-Assessments and Unit Screener

2:15 Systems for Supporting Paraprofessionals

- Opportunity to connect with colleagues around supporting your paraprofessionals.

2:45 Colleague Connect (with a Holiday Treat)