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# "Caught in the Continuum": How Special Educators Facilitate Access for Students With Extensive Support Needs

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# “Caught in the Continuum”: How Special Educators Facilitate Access for Students With Extensive Support Needs

A Dissertation by

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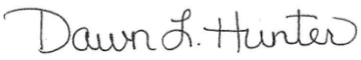

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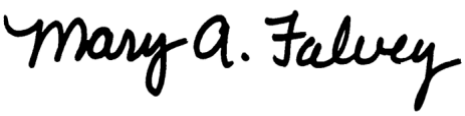

Mary Falvey, Ph.D.

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When I started the doctoral program, I noticed a quote on the Google Scholar homepage. It said, “Stand on the shoulders of giants.” I took it in but didn’t fully appreciate it until I got more in-depth in my studies.

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# ABSTRACT

"Caught in the Continuum": How Special Educators Facilitate Access for Students With Extensive Support Needs

by Megan Doty

Despite the preponderance of scholarly literature advocating the benefits of including students with disabilities in general education, students with ESN continue to be educated in restrictive settings. Limited research exists on how to facilitate access to inclusive opportunities in these segregated self-contained settings, yet this is primarily where these students are educated. Additionally, educators of these students are often "caught in the continuum;" teaching in a system that is set to exclude their students while attempting to facilitate access. This qualitative research study used collective case study methodology and methods to analyze this gap in the literature. This dissertation aimed to determine how educators in segregated self-contained settings facilitate access to general education curriculum and peers for students with ESN at the student, school, and district levels. Subsequently, it aimed to identify the educational practices special educators use to facilitate this access and what challenges and barriers they encounter. Through semistructured interviews and related documentation, findings highlight the perspectives of special education teachers, including the supports, educational practices, and barriers they experience when providing access for their students with ESN. These findings lead to recommendations for future research and practice as we continue to endeavor for access for all.

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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| Abbreviation | Meaning |
|---|---|
| AAC | Augmentative Alternative Communication |
| AT | Assistive Technology |
| DS | Disability Studies |
| DSE | Disability Studies in Education |
| EAHCA | Education for All Handicapped Children Act |
| ESN | ESN |
| FAPE | Free and Appropriate Public Education |
| GE | General Education |
| IDEA | Individuals with Disabilities Education Act |
| IEP | Individualized Education Plan |
| LRE | Least Restrictive Environment |
| MTSS | Multi-tiered System of Supports |
| PBIS | Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports |
| RTI | Response to Intervention |
| SWD | Students with Disabilities |
| SWPBIS | School-wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports |
| UDL | Universal Design for Learning |

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Students with extensive support needs (ESN) have the fundamental and legal right to education with their peers without disabilities in general education (GE) environments, and although progress has been made, students with ESN continue to be educated in restrictive placements (80% or more of the school day) outside of GE (Morningstar et al., 2017). ESN can be defined as students who require "ongoing pervasive support and might have a disability label such as significant cognitive disability, autism, developmental disabilities, or multiple disabilities" (Taub et al., 2017, p. 127). These students represent 1%–2% of all students and often participate in alternate state assessments (Taub et al., 2017). Wehmeyer et al. (2016) also included students with ESN require significant support in all aspects of their lives.

Despite the research suggesting the benefits of access to GE and peers and the harmful effects of not including them, students with ESN have continued to lack access and be educated in segregated settings (Brock, 2018; Cosier et al., 2018; Kleinert, 2020; Kurth et al., 2016; Morningstar & Kurth, 2017; Wehmeyer et al., 2021; White et al., 2020). Current school systems have continued to be set up to segregate students. Teachers in these systems are often left with the responsibility of how to "do inclusion" or create access within systems that are built to segregate (Conderman & Stephens, 2000; Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2018). The present empirical research on the subject has yet to address this situation as the research has been conducted primarily in fully included settings.

To adequately address the continued exclusion of students with ESN and investigate actionable ways to facilitate their access to GE curriculum and peers, additional research must be done in segregated settings in which they are currently being educated. This study aimed to address this gap in the literature and to determine how educators of students with ESN in self-

contained settings are demonstrating active resistance in their efforts to facilitate access to GE curriculum and peers.

This introductory chapter provides background and context to set the foundation for this research study. This is followed by a brief explanation of the theoretical framework guiding the research. The problem is presented as well as a rationale for the study and its significance. The research question are examined, and the nature of the study is explored. Essential terms are qualified for the purposes of this study, and finally, assumptions are discussed.

## Background

The journey of including students with ESN in education is not new. In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), also known as Public Law 94-142, was passed, federally mandating that students with disabilities (SWD) receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). This law was reauthorized and amended in 1986, 1990, 1997, and then again in 2004 and was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1990, 2004); the LRE portion of IDEA mandates SWD be educated with their peers without disabilities to the "maximum extent appropriate." As a result of subsequent case law, the principle of LRE, although largely debated, has been often associated with the inclusion of SWD (Yell, 2018).

In the 46 years since the passage of EAHCA, progress toward including SWD has occurred, but to what extent? After analyzing trends in LRE placement rates over the past 25 years, Williamson et al. (2020) found GE placements increased across all 13 disability categories stipulated under IDEA, whereas restrictive placements decreased. Although these data indicated an upward trend in inclusive placements, further research has shown students with ESN have been included at a lower rate than their peers with mild- or high-incidence disabilities

(Morningstar et al., 2017). Data from the U.S. Department of Education's (2018) Annual Report to Congress on the implementation of IDEA also stated that one half of students with ESN spent less than 40% of their time in regular classrooms per day. Essentially, students with ESN have continued to be excluded from inclusive placements.

However, research has supported the "multiple benefits of inclusive placements for students with severe disabilities across academic, social, communication, self-determination, vocational, and behavioral domains" (Agran et al., 2020, p. 5). Data have also suggested positive outcomes when students with ESN are included and negative consequences when excluding them (Gee et al., 2020). These negative consequences include but are not limited to a lack of communication, engagement, and rigor and limited access to the grade-level curriculum (Kurth et al., 2016). In addition, districts with less inclusive placements were found to spend more on due process litigation than other districts (White et al., 2020). Despite evidence supporting inclusion that contributed to significantly improved school and postsecondary outcomes, students with ESN have often continued to be placed in segregated settings (Brock, 2018; Cosier et al., 2018; Kleinert, 2020; Morningstar & Kurth, 2017; Wehmeyer et al., 2021; White et al., 2020).

## Statement of Problem

Despite the breadth of research demonstrating the benefits of including students with ESN, the lack of inclusion has been often attributed to the principle of the LRE. In theory, LRE should provide access to GE for SWD; however, in practice, the principle itself legitimizes restrictive placements (Taylor, 1988, 2004). As Wehmeyer et al. (2016) suggested, students with ESN entered into school and a system that segregated them. This system has continued to perpetuate the "antiquated belief that students with severe disabilities require more restrictive placements with highly specialized services" (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 2). Agran et al. (2020)

commented this belief does not treat students as individuals but as a generic category. Researchers Causton-Theoharis et al. (2011) also investigated the belief that restrictive placements are necessary for students with ESN and found no data to support this claim. This "historical marginalization" and "continued limiting of expectations" for students with ESN has affected and continues to affect decisions about placements, limiting students with ESN access to education with their peers (Agran et al., 2020; Taub et al., 2017).

Although progress for students with ESN has been slow, it has been assisted by case law and organizations such as the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS). Founded in 1979, OSERS (2019) provides continued guidance on the implementation of the IDEA in schools with the aim of "improving outcomes for people with disabilities." Within OSERS is the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP; OSERS, 2022), which can affect policy through various methods investigated in the literature review. Through recent case law, these agencies have produced guidance to local education agencies (LEA) on how best to provide a FAPE of high quality.

More recently, the federal court case of *Endrew F. v. Douglas County* (2017) stipulated high expectations must be held for students, including those with ESN, ensuring students make progress year to year and receive meaningful educational benefit. Additional relevant case law is elaborated upon in Chapter 2, the literature review of this study. The literature supports the idea that inclusion is an effective avenue for all students to succeed (Agran et al., 2020; Quirk et al., 2017; Taub et al., 2017). Not only is inclusion more effective than restrictive placements, but it is also essential to quality lives for students with ESN (Sandoval-Gomez et al., 2020). Mortier (2020) stated, "Inclusion is not only considered a fundamental freedom but is also a way to develop one's full human potential, and one's sense of dignity and self-worth, as well as being a

way to participate effectively in society" (p. 330). Although the literature indicated progress has been made for providing access to GE curriculum and peers for SWD, limited inclusion opportunities have remained for students with ESN (Cosier et al., 2020). Empirical research focused on students in self-contained settings has been absent from the literature; this study aimed to address this problem.

## Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

Most students with ESN are educated in restrictive placements. The National Center for Education Statistics (2022) reported, in 2020–2021, only 20% of students with intellectual disability, 15% of students with multiple disabilities, and 40% of students with autism were educated along with their peers in GE classrooms for 80% or more of the school day. According to a study conducted by Cosier et al. (2020), which analyzed placement of students with ESN in 938 school districts in California, 50% of students were included less than 40% of the day or in a separate school. Despite these statistics, the preponderance of scholarly literature, textbooks, and teacher preparation programs have advocated for strategies that support primarily fully inclusive educational environments (Kurth et al., 2012; Lowrey et al., 2017; Olson et al., 2016; Shogren et al., 2015; Toews et al., 2020).

The discrepancy between where students with ESN have been educated and where the research on providing them access has been conducted highlights the need for more research in this area. Furthermore, educators work in a system that does not support access for their students with ESN. The limited research on the subject indicates another gap in the literature that must be considered when investigating the phenomenon in question. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify and document how educators facilitate access to inclusion opportunities for students with ESN in self-contained settings, including the teachers' experiences facilitating

access. Additionally, the study identified what educational practices they use and what challenges and barriers they encounter. This case study research attempted to address this identified gap using the following questions to guide this qualitative study:

1. How do educators in self-contained settings facilitate access to general education curriculum and peers for students with ESN? At the teacher/classroom level? At the school level? At the district/community level?
2. What educational practices do educators in self-contained settings use to facilitate access to general education curriculum and peers?
3. What challenges and barriers do educators in self-contained settings encounter when facilitating access to general education curriculum and peers?

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks used in approaching this problem included disability studies (DS) and disability studies in education (DSE). Within a constructionism framework, DS "views disability as a social, political and cultural phenomenon" (Cosier & Ashby, 2016, p. 5) and acknowledges disability throughout the lifespan. Within DS are multiple models of disability, including but not limited to the social, moral, medical, minority, and cultural models. Historically, the "moral and medical models of disability have . . . dominated the lives of disabled people" (Goodley, 2017, p. 27). These models are explored in more detail in the historical background produced in the literature review in Chapter 2. More recently, however, the social model of disability has arisen, which focuses on societal barriers creating disabling conditions (Goodley, 2017).

When applied to the education of SWD, DSE has emerged as a different perspective and approach to educating all students (Taylor, 2006). Instead of the medical model upon which

special education was originally based, where disability was viewed as something to be cured, DSE proposes the social model, where disability is a product of the environment and differences are embraced (Cosier & Ashby, 2016). Both DS and DSE offer a lens through which to view and analyze the challenges associated with inclusion. Goodley (2017) encouraged looking at broader systemic issues when investigating inclusion's lack of success. Rood and Ashby (2020) also commented on this by stating:

> Within Disability Studies in Education, inclusion is not a place or a service, but a philosophy, in which the practice of teaching demands innovative thinking to unpack and disrupt culturally normative practices, to support all students' meaningful access to, and belonging within schools and communities. (p. 132)

This application of DSE to inclusion is significant for this study as it necessitates an emphasis on supports that provide access and belonging to the community. For spaces within the system of special education to be equipped to honor all student differences, it is essential for teachers' efforts to be documented. These theoretical frameworks are further investigated in this dissertation's literature review.

## Rationale for the Study

The following section provides a foundation for explaining the multiple rationales for this study. These rationales include the alarming special education teacher shortage and the lack of access to the GE curriculum and peers for students with ESN. Including students with ESN with their GE peers is complex. This process includes many different strategies and stakeholders, including systemic beliefs and paraeducator implementation of policy-to-strategy (Morningstar et al., 2017; Walker et al., 2021). In the middle of these factors is the classroom, where students with ESN have continued to be excluded, which has affected teacher job satisfaction and

retention (Pearson et al., 2015). Pearson et al. (2015) noted teachers whose students with ESN were included for most of their school day had positive attitudes toward their jobs, whereas those with students in self-contained settings were much lower. Often understaffed, underfunded, and underprepared, staff could benefit from actionable steps to facilitate students with ESN access to inclusion opportunities.

The struggle to exist within a system set to exclude their students has caused many teachers to leave the profession altogether (Rood & Ashby, 2020). As a whole, the lack of available credentialed teachers is staggering, with approximately 1 in 5 teachers leaving the profession, surpassing any other content area (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018). According to a brief produced by Darling-Hammond et al. (2018), special education had the highest amount of substandard (i.e., lacking a full teaching credential) and emergency hirings resulting in 2 out of every 3 teachers not fully certified. Furthermore, although much research exists on this topic, there is a paucity in the literature surrounding special education teacher voice.

The second rationale for this study was the need for more available inclusion opportunities for students with ESN. Although progress has been made, this progress has been slow and students with ESN have continued to be educated in restrictive placements (Wehmeyer et al., 2016). Mortier (2020) highlighted a vital facet of the argument for inclusion in that the end goal is not simply full inclusion but quality lives, or "enviable lives," as Turnbull (2010) has stated. For students with ESN to have successful postschool outcomes, they need specific skills that can only be attained through regularly engaging with their GE peers while in school (Agran et al., 2020).

In Chapter 2, the literature review clearly shows most of the present literature on facilitating access for students with ESN has been conducted in fully included settings. At the

same time, it has been well documented that most students with ESN have been educated in segregated settings. The students with ESN being educated in restrictive placements deserve efforts to provide them with opportunities to learn and interact with their same-age peers (Taub et al., 2017). Teachers of SWD urgently need additional support on how to facilitate inclusion (Rood & Ashby, 2020). The research questions for this study are reviewed in the next section.

## Significance of the Study

This study is significant on four levels: academic research, policy, practice, and the lives of those involved. Students with ESN have been educated primarily in restrictive placements, although the sum of recent research on practices to facilitate inclusion has been conducted in fully or predominantly included settings. This gap in the literature has failed to recognize the students and teachers in the current education environment that are in these restrictive settings. Although change is being made on a systemic level, policy changes require time for dissemination and implementation that students with ESN may not have in their school careers. Educational stakeholders in current schools have made efforts to facilitate the inclusion of students with ESN but have often operated independently with limited support (Rood & Ashby, 2020).

This study aimed to identify actionable classroom practices that teachers of students with ESN have taken to ensure more inclusive practices that may then be useful for other teachers to immediately employ in their classrooms. These classroom practices and the challenges and barriers educators have faced may provide insight and inform future policy decisions. By documenting the experiences of educational stakeholders and identifying practices used to facilitate access to GE, inclusion opportunities for students with ESN have the potential to be increased.

Finally, students with ESN, their families, general and special education teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals are all affected by the questions this study sought to address. For students with ESN, these practices and efforts stakeholders have made could be their only opportunities for inclusion. If these opportunities for inclusion and access to their peers are made more attainable, research has shown their postschool outcomes will improve (Agran et al., 2020; Gee et al., 2020). For these potential benefits to become a reality, this study needs to be presented in further detail.

## Nature of the Study

This study used case study design which entails gaining an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon and its subsequent context and meaning by analyzing a specific case (Merriam, 2001). This methodology was chosen because it allows for the inclusion of a variety of data, through a variety of means of documentation (e.g., archival records, interviews, observations, and physical artifacts; Yin, 2018). These data were necessary to understand the complex issue of how teachers facilitate access for their students with ESN. By interviewing these teachers, including reviewing related documents, and accounting for records and artifacts used in their efforts to provide access for their students with ESN, the question of "how" they educate students with ESN could attempt to be answered.

The target population for this study were credentialed special educators who worked directly with students with ESN in some capacity in K–12 school setting. As students with significant disabilities only consist of 1%–2% of the population, not all educational stakeholders would fit the selection criteria (Taub et al., 2017). Due to the limited pool of participants, purposeful and convenience sampling were used. The study design required sufficient data, so nine special educator participants were secured. A consent form was provided to each participant

to ensure their understanding of and role in the process. Semistructured interviews were conducted approximately three times with a minimum of 45 minutes for each interview. Additional related materials were included as part of the data collection process, including but not limited to documents such as fliers, syllabus, lesson plans, email correspondence, and others.

## Definitions of Terms

This dissertation used the following definitions of key terms: extensive support needs, inclusive education, and educational practices. Each of these are key terms defined in the following sections.

### Extensive Support Needs

For the purpose of this study, ESN was defined as students who require "ongoing pervasive support and might have a disability label such as significant cognitive disability, autism, developmental disabilities, or multiple disabilities" (Taub et al., 2017, p. 127). These students represent 1%–2% of all students and often participate in alternate state assessments (Taub et al., 2017).

### Inclusive Education

This study was centered on how special education teachers facilitate access to the GE curriculum and peers for students with ESN. To fully investigate this issue, understanding how students with ESN fit into the realm of inclusive education is essential. However, comprehending the idea of inclusive education in both theory and practice is complex. According to Villa and Thousand's (2016) book, *The Inclusive Education Checklist: A Self-Assessment of Best Practices,* inclusive education is supported by research and involves aspects of both "vision and practice" (p. 18) that account for the learning of all students in all environments. Successful inclusive education requires that students' diverse needs be embraced and planned for through

collaboration between all educational stakeholders. Essentially, “inclusive education is presuming competence and holding the highest of expectations” (Villa & Thousand, 2016, p. 17).

As an extension to this definition, Shyman (2015) imparted a multielement definition of inclusive education:

1. Inclusive education is a dynamic process by which students with and without exceptionalities receive their primary modes of service delivery in the general education environment;
2. All necessary supports, including environmental accommodations, instructional differentiation and curriculum material modification can and will be delivered in the general education classroom;
3. The individual, if able to do so, has shown a clear preference for being included in the general education classroom based on honest and clear descriptions of what the variety of setting options are;
4. Educational service provisions and intervention will be delivered in separate environments only in the case that supports provided in the general education classroom have been exhausted and shown to be ineffective at providing access to the curriculum;
5. And/or the individual, if able, has shown a clear preference to receive educational services in an environment other than the general education classroom;
6. Service delivery in a separate environment will be systematically replaced by service delivery in a regular education environment at the appropriate level, if preferred by

the individual, with the individual spending as much of the day as possible in the regular education classroom; and

7. The decision to educate in the general education classroom does not consider administrator or teacher preference or willingness, but only the appropriateness and accessibility of individual supports and student preference, whenever applicable. (p. 361)

Although extensive, Shyman's (2015) definition accounts for the intersectionality of a multitude of identities that may be present in students with ESN. Furthermore, it emphasizes the right to self-determination for all students, regardless of label, and emphasizes the important concept that inclusion and inclusive education is an amalgamation of unique circumstances. More concisely, Shyman (2015) also posited this definition: "all individuals, regardless of exceptionality, are entitled to the opportunity to be included in regular classroom environments while receiving the supports necessary to facilitate accessibility to both environment and information" (p. 351). For the purposes of this dissertation, this concise definition was used when inclusion and inclusive education were referenced.

**Educational Practices**

The term, educational practices, can be defined as it applies to both theory and practice. On a more conceptual level, educational practices can be described as "the work in schools that create equity-based professional learning frameworks that ensures that high-quality teaching and learning experiences exist for all learners" (Soles, 2020, p. 171). On a practical level, it can be defined as "policies, activities, and curriculum resources that are intended to increase the quality of education, and therefore, student outcomes" (Dillon, 2023, para. 2). Essentially, educational

practices are defined as the practices, including policies, activities, curriculum, strategies, and supports, educators use to ensure student success.

## Assumptions

For stakeholders' efforts to provide access to GE peers for students with ESN to be properly investigated, a few accepted assumptions must be explicitly analyzed. These include methodological, theoretical, and topic-specific assumptions. First, the methodological assumptions include inductive logic, meaning themes were developed based on the data collected, and measures were taken to ensure validity before any attempts at generalization. These measures included but were not limited to multiple sources of data, triangulation of data, and member-checking. It was assumed that this study was an accurate representation of the current realities and experiences that the educators interviewed encountered when endeavoring to provide access to their students with ESN.

The theoretical frameworks used in this dissertation were distinguished previously, including DS and DSE. The foundational assumption was that disability is a social construct, and disability is a product of the environment, not the person. This assumption was applied to the classroom. SWD have only been disabled by the system they are in, and it was assumed in this study that the system is special education. Given the right supports and appropriate environments, all students can be successful, leading to the final assumption of the study (Alquraini & Gut, 2012).

The topic-specific assumption is the concept of presuming competence. Coined by Biklen and Burke (2007), presuming competence is the belief that all students can learn. The concept's origins stem from Donnellan's (1984) Criterion of the Least Dangerous Assumption "where educators teach in a way that leaves open the greatest possibility/opportunity for development"

(Biklen, 2020, p. 235). The presumption of competence implies all students have the capacity, ability, and potential to learn (Biklen & Burke, 2007). It is important to note although there has been a significant amount of research for and against this concept when discussing facilitated communication, that was not the focus of this study. It was assumed this study used the previously presented belief of presuming competence when applied to students with ESN. As documented in Kurth et al.'s (2019) study, student disability labels and significant needs have been often used to rationalize their exclusion. These "unsubstantiated assumptions" (Kurth et al., 2019, p. 14) often do not treat students with dignity and respect, and these assumptions become ingrained in systems. Essential to the inclusion of students with ESN is the presumption of competence and the belief that all students can learn (Biklen, 2020).

The final topic-specific assumption was although the research for this study involved students in restrictive settings, it in no way condoned or approved of these placements. Most of the research on facilitating access and inclusion for students with ESN has occurred in fully included settings; however, most students with ESN have not been educated in these settings. This study needed to be conducted to honor all students in these restrictive placements with limited access to their peers as they wait for changes to be made on a systemic level. In addition to the students, the teachers and other educational stakeholders involved in efforts to include these students deserved to be present in the discussion of inclusion. An extension of the previously mentioned assumption was that research can be conducted in restrictive settings to document the access students with ESN experience. Hornby and Kauffman (2023) discussed the concept of full inclusion as a myth that has proved harmful for overall outcomes for SWD. The following section summarizes this introductory chapter.

## Summary

This chapter examined necessary background information to provide context on the issues this dissertation addressed. A statement of the problem, including the study's research questions, purpose, rationale, and significance, was outlined to establish the need for this study. The theoretical frameworks and nature of the study were briefly introduced, followed by the definition of key terms, including ESN, inclusion, and educational practices. Methodological, theoretical, and topic-specific assumptions of the study were inspected; these included using inductive logic, recognizing disability as a social construct, the presumption of competence, and acknowledging the conduction of research in restrictive settings without condoning the settings.

For this study to be conducted effectively, the foundation of the research needs to be explored. The next chapter consists of a literature review to provide further insight into the research on this topic and includes empirical and nonempirical research consisting of expert opinions. Chapter 3 follows the literature review and describes in detail the research methodology and methods selected for this study and all related information. Chapter 4 then reviews the findings from the study. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses the overall significance of this study's findings including implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research and practice.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter discusses three main topics: (a) the historical background relevant to the study, (b) the theoretical framework of the study, and (c) the current literature related to the topic of the study. The first portion of this chapter provides a historical background for the unique landscape of disability in education. Essential to understanding the entrenched ideas of exclusion that facilitate the continued segregation of students with extensive support needs (ESN), the complicated history of inclusive schooling needs to be investigated. The second section of this chapter, the theoretical framework, reviews the overarching ontological and epistemological paradigm of constructionism. Following this, a description of disability studies (DS) and disability studies in education (DSE) is presented, including an explanation of the prominent models of disability in education.

The third section of this chapter consists of a formal literature review regarding current literature, both nonempirical and empirical, on practices educators use to facilitate access to inclusive opportunities for their students with significant disabilities. It also includes a review of the literature on ESN, and special education teachers' experiences facilitating access. A comprehensive literature search was conducted to identify articles for inclusion with teacher voice. When searching for relevant articles, the EBSCO/ERIC search engine was used with the following search words: inclusion, inclusive education, classroom practices, educational practices, ESN, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, and autism; moderate to severe disabilities, and significant disabilities were also used as search terms as they are often used as language to refer to ESN.

The following terms were used in searching for literature related to special education teacher perspectives and experiences including their students with ESN: special education

teacher and ESN (including variations of this phrase). Articles were selected using the following inclusion criteria; studies were (a) conducted in the United States as this was the location of the study, (b) written in English, (c) included in peer-reviewed scholarly journals, (d) included a population specified as students with ESN or variations thereof, (e) addressed students in kindergarten through age 22, and (f) discussed classroom or educational practices to support the successful inclusion of students with ESN.

This search yielded approximately 60 articles spanning 20 years (2001–2023). Initially, the time was limited to the previous 5 years (2017–2023), but this span did not produce a sufficient number of articles. Due to this lack and the length of time this topic has been studied, time criteria were extended from 5 years to include the previous 11 years (2012–2023); this extension yielded 44 articles. Approximately 14 articles highlighted placement trends and dispensed related evidence, and 21 articles specified classroom practices but were nonempirical papers (including but not limited to literature reviews, informational essays, analytic essays, scholarly responses, and content analyses), leaving nine empirical research studies.

This portion of Chapter 2 uses all relevant nonempirical articles to provide context and present expert opinions; however, only the empirical research articles that met all inclusion criteria listed at the beginning of this section were analyzed. Selected articles were coded using axial coding to identify the main themes. The articles were examined thoroughly to identify practices relating to the successful inclusion of students with ESN. Following this review, codes were condensed into overarching categories that included subthemes that stipulated strategies and practices used. The final section of this chapter reviews the present literature on the voices of ESN special educators. In the next section, the historical background lays the foundation for this dissertation.

## Historical Background

Human diversity and the construct of disability have existed since the beginning of humankind (Goodley, 2011). Osgood (2008) commented on this phenomenon, stating, "Societies have acknowledged the existence of disability for thousands of years. Depending on the era and the culture, persons with significant and obvious disabling conditions have been demonized, defied, ignored, persecuted, protected, or isolated and exterminated" (p. 7). People with significant disabilities have historically been excluded from almost all parts of society (UNESCO, 2006). Despite barriers such as infrastructure limitations, cultural beliefs, traditions, or societal attitudes, the result has often been the same; people with ESN have been excluded (Kalyanpur & Rao, 2015; Kiuppis & Hausstätter, 2014; Rose, 2010).

Efforts toward the abolition of this exclusion can be seen in many human rights documents. These documents include the *World Declaration on Education for All* (UNESCO, 1990), the *Salamanca Statement* (UNESCO, 1994), the *Dakar Framework for Action* (UNESCO, 2000), *Guidelines for Inclusion: Ensuring Access to Education for All* (UNESCO, 2006), and the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations, 2007), which have demanded fundamental rights for people with disabilities, including the right to education. Substantial work has been conducted across nations on the inclusion of students with ESN in education. However, for this dissertation, I focused on the United States because the study took place in the United States. A comprehensive history was too long to include in this dissertation; therefore, a thorough summary of the history was provided.

At the beginning of his book, *The History of Special Education: A Struggle for Equality in American Public Schools*, Osgood (2008) indicated, "Throughout our nation's history, children identified as disabled in the United States have lived lives reflecting remarkable

ambivalence toward their place in American society" (p. xiii). To fully understand the systems in place that continue to perpetuate the segregation of students with ESN, it is necessary to review the history. This history led to deeply situated beliefs of exclusion that has limited progress toward access and equality.

The next sections cover significant periods of U.S. history, including (a) colonial and postrevolutionary United States, (b) eugenics and intelligence testing, (c) compulsory education, (d) post-World War II and civil rights, (e) case law before the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), (f) the era of EAHCA, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and (g) subsequent case law.

**Colonial and Postrevolutionary United States**

The story of segregation for people with disabilities dates to the start of the nation. In colonial and postrevolutionary United States, people with disabilities, including those with intellectual disabilities, were seen as objects of pity (Goodley, 2017) and the moral model of disability was extremely prevalent (Trent, 2017). Goodley (2017) described this as the idea that the manifestation of disability is inexplicably linked to sin, causing shame to the person with a disability and their family. This view later contributed to what Trent (2017) referred to as the "burden of the feebleminded" (p. 55).

After the Civil War, the notion that effective education for people with disabilities could only happen in segregation was rampant. Trent (2017) referred to this concept as "constructing a place for idiocy" (p. 55) with an emphasis on making these people "less burdensome" (p. 55). People with disabilities were labeled based on the ability of that person to be trained and returned to society. For example, Kerlin (1877) determined three types of "mental defectives:" (a)

superior grades who could be returned to society after 5–10 years, (b) orphans and imbeciles, and (c) lower grades who needed more significant support.

In the late 1800s, institutions were on the rise, each with a specific purpose (Trent, 2017). The specialization of institutions effectively linked disability with other minorities and their subsequent segregation. The 1880 census revealed, for the first time, the large number of "feeble-minded" people received little to no effective care; specifically, 153.3 per 100,000 people as opposed to the 2.5 per 100,000 from the 1870 census (Trent, 2017). Social reformers addressed this supposed burden to society through legislation and policy that facilitated state institutionalization and ownership. The Undesirables Act of the 1882 Immigration Act was notable as it prohibited populations such as "convicts, paupers, the insane, and idiots" (Trent, 2017, p. 81) that were likely to become public responsibility from entering the United States. Minorities, including people with disabilities, people of color, and immigrants, were used as a scapegoat for society's problems.

**Eugenics and Intelligence Testing**

Concurrently, the widespread movement of eugenics, hereditarian theory, and intelligence testing occurred in the early 1900s. Eugenics, defined by Davenport (1911) as "the science of the improvement of the human race by better breeding" (p. 1), had a devastating effect on the human race. Eugenics and the hereditarian theory of intelligence quotient (IQ), which attributes intelligence to genetics, provided a rationale for segregating and eliminating many groups of minority peoples; this occurred through institutionalization, sterilization, and genocide. Goodley (2011) commented on this concept by saying, "Scientific assessment of 'the feebleminded' permitted society to intervene through sterilization and institutionalization to reduce the 'breeding' opportunities of these 'unproductive' individuals" (p. 114). The "menace

of the feeblemind" (Trent, 2017, p. 29) referenced the scare tactics used during this period to rationalize the poor treatment of any person society deemed dangerous as they were faulted for society's problems. These people included but were not limited to immigrants, women, criminals, and people with disabilities. Lazerson (1983) commented on this "menace" as seen in schools by stating, "Indeed, no argument associated with special education received greater attention . . . than the fear that the unattended or uneducated feeble-minded were the carriers of social malignancy" (p. 24).

In schools, eugenics, the hereditarian theory of IQ, and intelligence testing were presented as answers to what to do with students with disabilities (SWD). Schools looked toward this sorting system so SWD could be identified and removed so as not to hinder other students and placed in different placements. Goddard and Herman were cited as the proponents of intelligence testing in schools (Gould, 1981). Herman—a psychologist—and Goddard synonymized intelligence testing with schooling-related IQ. Throughout the 1920s, their views dominated, and special classes grew dramatically, becoming a fixture of public schooling (Trent, 2017).

**Compulsory Education**

The idea that SWD could only be educated in segregated environments was solidified during the early 1900s with compulsory education. Until this point, those with disabilities were placed in institutions or other segregated settings, often with little attention from the public (Lazerson, 1983). It was not until the effective implementation of compulsory education that SWD were brought to the forefront. Between 1890–1915, public school enrollment increased by 55%, from 12.7 million to 19.7 million (Lazerson, 1983). Those in education were asked the genuine question of what they should do.

In 1913, educators were interviewed on the presence of "backward children" or SWD (Johnson, 1913). One of the research questions was, "What, if any, is the effect, beneficial or hurtful, on a backward or feeble-minded child of contact with normal children in the classroom?" (Johnson, 1913, p. 97). The language used then can be tied to language used in schools at the time of the current study; the IDEA (2004) stated in the individualized education plan (IEP) document, the team must consider any potential negative or harmful effects of placing this student in a restrictive environment. The similarity in language cannot be overlooked. Lazerson (1983) communicated leadership of the time purported keeping SWD, referred to as "backward or defective children" (p. 21), segregated from students without disabilities or "normals" (p. 23).

Another study frequently referenced in the literature was Ayres's (1909) *Laggards in the Schools*, which found 33.7% of all elementary children to be "retarded." Not only was emphasis placed on the benefits of special classes as a rational way to educate these students, but also the classes were deemed necessary (Osgood, 2008). These "differentiated settings" facilitated the removal of SWD and educating them separately. This approach was deemed more fiscally responsible for segregating them as well. Much of the segregation and motivation behind this method can be attributed to the "menace of the feebleminded" (Trent, 2017, p. 129).

**Post-World War II and Civil Rights**

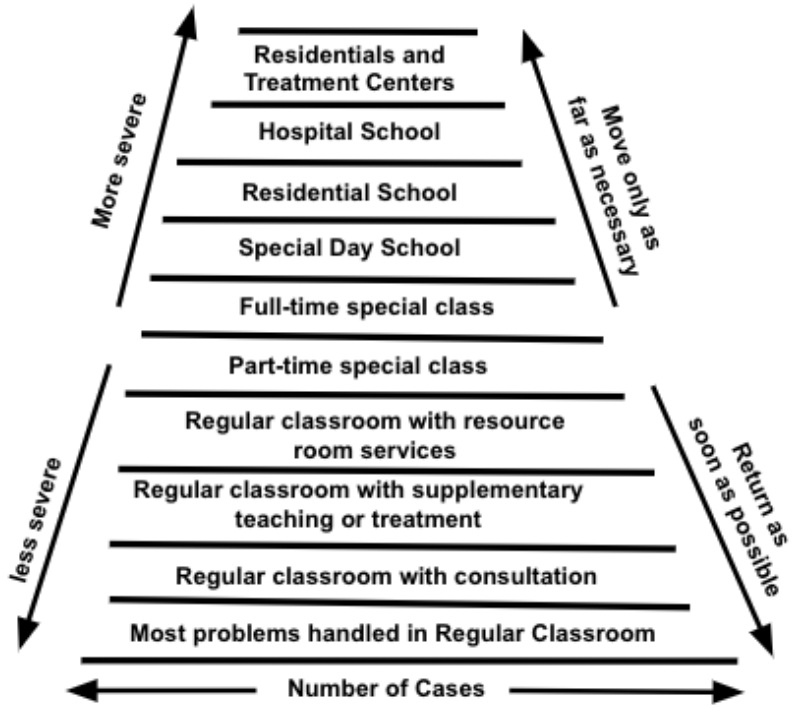
Between 1948 and 1968, the number of SWD in public schools grew from 357,000 to 2,252,000 (or 1.2% to 4.5% of the school population; Lazerson, 1983). This increase was attributed not only to compulsory schooling but also to the population boom that occurred after World War II. With this growth came a "heightened awareness of the human potential for rehabilitation and re-education demonstrated in World War II and the ensuing recognition of the dignity of the human person" (Dybwad, 1980, p. 85), which paved the way for parent-led

organizations and groups. Advancements in both civil rights and education happened concurrently during this era. The Civil Rights Movement in education began with the desegregation of schools—first in 1947 with *Mendez v. Westminster*, which desegregated schools in California, and later *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, which found separate was, in fact, not equal and federally mandated schools be desegregated. Desegregation based on race, although not implemented fully in practice then, allowed for the conversation to begin regarding inclusion of other minority groups (i.e., disabled).

In the 1960s, the federal government dedicated attention and resources to educating SWD (Osgood, 2008). Society struggled with "effective ways to address it [disability] in schools, institutions, and the community" (Osgood, 2008, p. 112) as children with disabilities transitioned from institution to schools. As a result of this struggle, early works on different, and segregated, settings gained popularity. In 1962, in education, one of the earlier references to the multiple placements was documented when discussing a hierarchy of special education programs (see Figure 1). Reynolds (1962) posited, "It was suggested that having a broad range of services is important and that children should be placed in programs of no more special character than absolutely necessary" (p. 370). In addition to Reynold's hierarchy of programs was Deno's (1970) cascade of services (see Figure 2). Although these continuums were created in efforts to provide services for all students, even those with extensive needs, it unfortunately aided in the medicalization of special education. By creating places to provide specialized services, the foundation of segregated placements was solidified. The range of services Reynolds referred to, and Deno's (1970) cascade of services are compared in Figures 1 and 2.

**Figure 1**

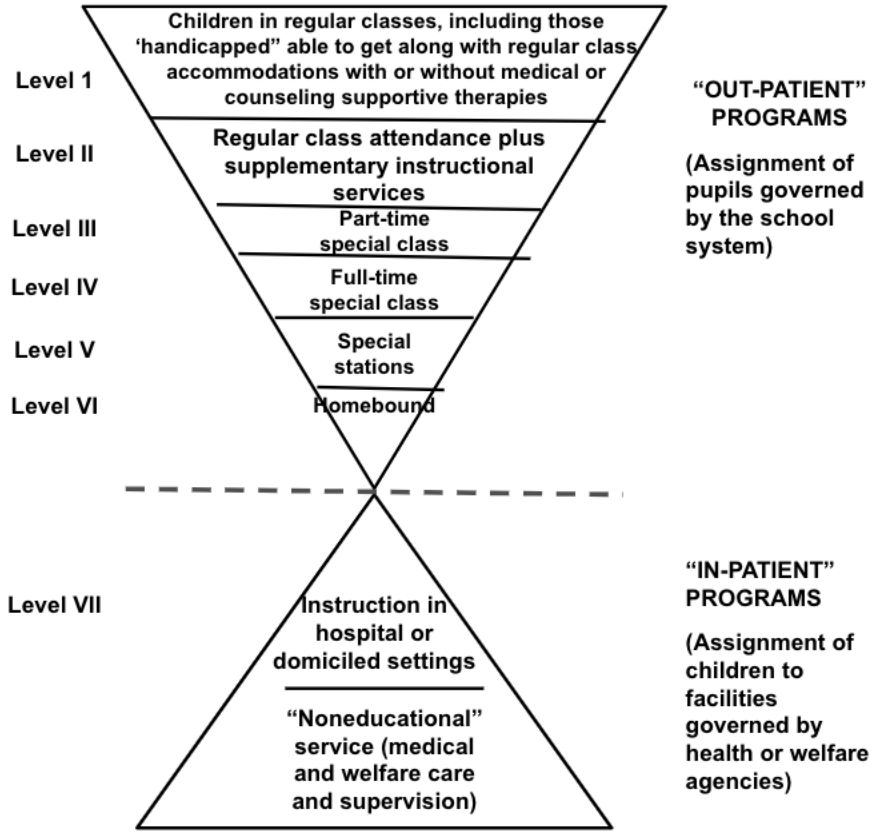
*Early Least Restrictive Environment Continuum of Placement: Reynolds Hierarchy of Programs*




*Note.* Adapted from Reynolds, M. C. (1962). A framework for considering some issues in special education. *Exceptional Children, 28*(7), 367–370.

**Figure 2**

*Early Least Restrictive Environment Continuum of Placements: Deno's Cascade of Services*




*Note.* From "Special Education as Developmental Capital" by E. Deno, 1970, *Exceptional Children*, *37*(3), 229–237 (https://doi.org/10.1177/001440297003700306).

In the mid-1960s, Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society began funding several social care reforms. Coleman (1968) highlighted this concept by stating, "We'll give you crutches, we'll give you remedial reading, we'll help you run the race" (p. 17). This frame of mind lent itself to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination in employment and ended segregation in public spaces. In education, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 was passed, which provided federal funding for schools primarily made up of low-income families, early start programs and preschools, school materials, and special education services. Following this act was the Education of the Handicapped Act of 1966, which

established those schools accepting federal funds must provide access to education for SWD. As the federal government provided revenue, people gained rights; whether it be access to a drinking fountain or a classroom, desegregation was beginning to occur.

**Case Law Pre-EAHCA**

In the years leading up to the passage of the EAHCA in 1975, multiple cases referenced and deeply affected the inclusion of students with ESN. The first notable case was *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) v. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1971), referred to as PARC, which came about due to SWD not receiving a publicly supported education. The court found SWD between ages 6–21 must be provided with free public education and that it would be best to educate SWD with their peers without disabilities. Validating the hard work of many parents of SWD, PARC set a precedent that not only were all children educable, but also SWD had the right to an education (Biklen et al., 2014). Although providing a free public education could be applied in practice, the PARC ruling sparked debate regarding inclusion that still exists today (Yell, 2018).

A year later, *Mills v. Board of Education* (1972) ruled segregation based on race or disability in public education was unconstitutional. It also established procedural safeguards, also known as parent rights, which delineated the rights of parents to appeal, have access to student records, and be notified of processes. These safeguards provided the foundation for EAHCA. Additionally, setting the stage for EAHCA was the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This act, which included Section 504, was a hard-fought battle won by advocates and people with disabilities. Section 504 represented the “first federal civil rights law to protect the rights of persons with disabilities” (Yell, 2012, p. 52) and aimed to allow a person with a disability to receive federal financial assistance without discrimination.

**Era of EAHCA**

Although many advancements were made in the early 1970s, SWD were still experiencing minimal educational opportunities (Yell, 2012). Not only were many SWD excluded from public schools in general, but also those admitted did not always receive an appropriate education. With these concerns in mind, President Ford signed the EAHCA, also known as PL 94-142, into law in November 1975, which established many much-needed provisions. Among these provisions were that SWD were guaranteed free appropriate public education (FAPE) under the law. It also mandated SWD had the right to "(a) nondiscriminatory testing, evaluation and placement procedures; (b) education in the least restrictive environment; (c) procedural due process, including parent involvement; (d) a free education; and include an appropriate education" (Yell, 2012, p. 53). Included in EAHCA was an avenue for schools to receive federal funding through local education agencies (LEAs).

The EAHCA also outlined students were required to have an IEP and were entitled to a FAPE in the least restrictive environment (LRE) possible. Additionally, the following areas were confirmed: areas of eligibility, related services (including transportation and other support services), and parent rights, including to file complaints and due process. At this time, the term LRE was referenced as the educational agency's responsibility to ensure services were provided in the LRE "commensurate with their needs" (EAHCA, 1975, Sec. 618[d][2][A]). Furthermore, EAHCA detailed the concept of LRE by stating, to maximum extent appropriate, handicapped children, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not handicapped, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use

of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (EAHCA, 1975). In 1986, EAHCA was reauthorized under PL 99-457 and included early intervention, mandating supports and services for children with disabilities and their families from birth. Prior to this change, the eligibility minimum was 3 years old.

Following this time, several professional associations endorsed EAHCA, such as the Council for Exceptional Children in 1976, the American Association on Mental Deficiency in 1981, and eventually, the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps in 1986. Gaining traction, the emerging concept of the LRE was seen in additional case law, further legitimizing the principle. *Roncker v. Walter* (1983) began because the school wanted to place a student in a segregated special school. This case established the Roncker Portability Test, which found if services provided in the segregated setting can occur in nonsegregated settings, this transport is required under EAHCA and the LRE mandate. Another test was established with *Daniel R. R. v. State Board of Education* (1989) in which it had to be determined if education in the general education (GE) setting, with supplementary aids and services, could be achieved "satisfactorily" and if the student has been included to the "maximum extent appropriate" (Yell, 2012, p. 278).

**Individuals With Disabilities Education Act**

In 1990, IDEA was passed, amending EAHCA, becoming the newly established law across the country. IDEA governs students between birth to graduation or age 22 in California could qualify for special education services following assessment by being deemed eligible under one of the 13 disability categories specified in the law. Autism and traumatic brain injury were confirmed as new eligibilities. The students were also now required to have an individualized transition plan (ITP) as part of their IEP to support transition to adulthood. Also included under IDEA were child find, where education organizations must find and assess a

student who is suspected of having a disability, and procedural safeguards, which were referenced earlier.

Within IDEA, the LRE principle was revised to included person first language. Instead of "handicapped children," the term "children with disabilities" was used (IDEA, 1990). Further case law regarding the practice of LRE followed the passage of IDEA. In *Oberti v. Board of Education of The Borough of Clementon* (1993), a student with Down syndrome, Rafael Oberti, was placed in a segregated, self-contained classroom despite parent's request for a less restrictive placement. The court found the school district at fault for not providing an "appropriate" education in the LRE. Its significance created case law to guide districts on placement decisions. Similarly, in *Sacramento City Unified School District v. Rachel H.* (1994), Rachel's parents requested she, a student with a moderate intellectual disability, be included in GE for the entirety of her school day. The courts found the district did not make a good-faith effort to include Rachel with her peers. Thus, a four-factor test was established:

> (1) the educational benefits of the general education classroom with supplementary aids and services as compared with the educational benefits of the special classroom; (2) the nonacademic benefits of interaction with students without disabilities; (3) the effect of the student's presence on the teacher and on other students in the classroom; (4) the cost of mainstreaming. (Yell, 2018, p. 267)

Clearly, the placement of SWD in the LRE is a complicated process; much must be considered when determining the placement of SWD. These cases—*Oberti* (1992) and *Rachel H.* (1994)—were significant, not only for the guidance provided for districts but also their public support for inclusion (Yell, 2018). Additional amendments in 2004 reauthorized IDEIA, updating and finalizing changes that occurred over the 14 years since its original inception.

Simple in theory but complex in delivery, LRE should provide access to GE for SWD; however, in practice, the principle itself legitimizes restrictive placements (Taylor, 2004). The concept of the LRE remained vague yet inexplicably associated with the inclusion of SWD.

**Present Day**

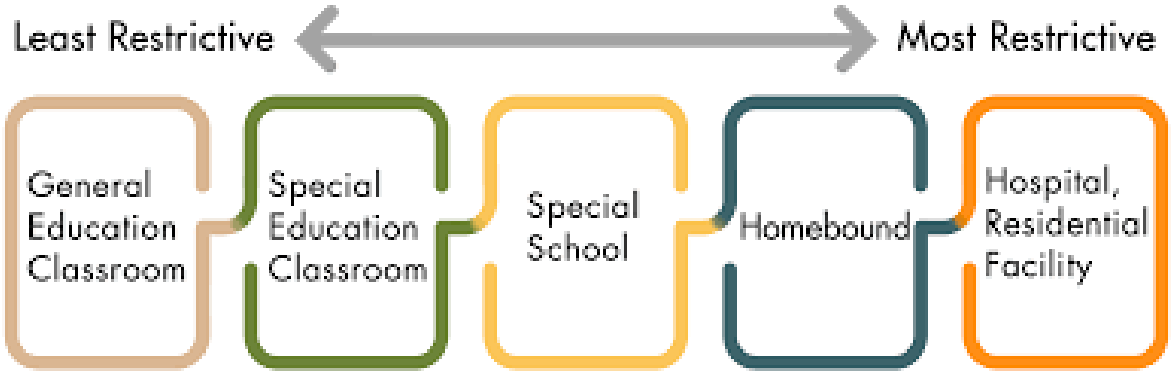
The current landscape of special education and the principle of LRE has continued to be affected primarily through case law. More recently, *Endrew F. v. Douglas County* in 2017 determined SWD are owed more than a de minimis, or minimal, educational benefit. This ruling meant there needed to be a clear progression of skills in student IEP. Although not directly related to LRE, the effect Endrew has had on education and the placement of SWD cannot be overlooked (McKenney, 2017). Essentially, doing the minimum was established to be unsatisfactory according to the Endrew ruling, which reinforced the notion that SWD can and should have the opportunity to make adequate progress toward their goals and the GE curriculum. In an article determining the effect of Endrew on educating SWD, McKenney (2017) stated, "Teams will need to carefully balance the need to provide 'ambitious' education under FAPE, and the need to consider the maximum degree to which students can be in the LRE" (p. 12).

The LRE principle has been used often as hope for students, their families, and even educators that SWD can be included and educated with their peers (Taylor, 2004). However, as stipulated earlier, the LRE principle has legitimized restrictive placements (Taylor, 2004). These placements still exist, and research and data have shown they are being used for SWD. Although much case law has occurred clearly since the 1970s influencing LRE, the continuum of placements is almost identical. Figure 3 shows a continuum of services ranging from the GE

classroom, considered the least restrictive, to a hospital or residential facility, which is considered the most restrictive. This continuum represents placement options of SWD.

**Figure 3**

*Continuum of Alternative Placements for Services*




*Note.* From Information Brief: Least Restrictive Environment IRIS, 2010c (https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdf_info_briefs/IRIS_Least_Restrictive_Environment_InfoBrief_092519.pdf)

Since the *Endrew F.* ruling, additional case law has occurred that has provided guidance on the concept of LRE. In *Hyde v. Hamilton County Department of Education* (2018), the sixth circuit court ruled that the student with Down syndrome, Luka Hyde, should be educated at their school of residence in the LRE and not in a separated class at a different school. Further supporting the education of SWD in less restrictive placements was a more recent case, *S.B. v. Los Angeles Unified School District* (2023). The courts found that the offer of a more restrictive placement during extended school year was inadequate and required that a placement be created for this student so they could be educated with their nondisabled peers as they were during the regular school year.

In summary, SWD, specifically ESN, have continued to be placed in restrictive placements (Morningstar et al., 2017). This historical background demonstrates SWD have been and continue to be excluded from their peers (Brock, 2018; Cosier et al., 2018; Kleinert, 2020; Morningstar & Kurth, 2017; Wehmeyer et al., 2021; White et al., 2020). From the start of the nation, people with disabilities did not have access to education and were treated as objects of pity, considered a result of the parent' sins (Goodley, 2017). Eugenics and intelligence testing created standardized systems of exclusion that led to the institutionalization, sterilization, and elimination of people with disabilities (Goodley, 2011). As compulsory education began and the fabric of the United States changed to reflect the industrialization of society, people with disabilities continued to be segregated, whether in institutions, separate schools, or separate classes (Lazerson, 1983). Following World War II, civil rights movements led to case law and federal law that forged rights for students and people with disabilities (Dybwad, 1980). Throughout this history, SWD have always been one thing—separate. The following section provides an explanation of the theoretical framework for this dissertation, finalizing the foundation for the literature review and study.

## Theoretical Framework

This study aimed to determine how educators facilitate access to inclusive opportunities for students with ESN, what practices they employ, and what barriers and challenges they face. The current landscape of special education has been complicated, as made clear through the historical background provided. In developing this study and reviewing the various stakeholders and phenomena involved, a primary theoretical framework emerged—disability studies in education (DSE). Prior delving into the tenets of DSE, the overarching theory of disability studies (DS) must be considered.

Disability and the human body have been viewed and documented throughout history (Siebers, 2001). How the disabled body is perceived has been determined or socially constructed by the society, culture, economy, and political environment in which they exist (Linton, 1998). DS, then, moves the disability from the person to the society; however, DS is much more complicated than this (Goodley, 2011). Linton (1998) situated DS as a response to ableist structures, the dominant culture of society that favors nondisabled people.

Although many different approaches to the study of disability have existed for some time, DS began in the early 1980s as a formal academic notion (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012). Much of DS was born out of other minority theories such as feminist or queer theory because they offered an alternative way of viewing the body (Siebers, 2001). Equally crucial to the origins of DS were self-advocacy and parent advocacy groups. Ferguson and Nusbaum (2012) commented on the importance of this early work by stating, "Powerful memoirs reflecting on the meanings and experiences of disability from a personal perspective served as critical testimony to the generations of voices that had been largely silenced or ignored both in the sciences and the humanities" (p. 71).

> The Society for Disability Studies (2024) defined DS in their mission statement, stating:
>
> Disability studies recognizes that disability is a key aspect of human experience, and that disability has important political, social, and economic implications for society as a whole, including both disabled and nondisabled people. Through research, artistic production, teaching and activism, disability studies seek to augment understanding of disability in all cultures and historical periods, to promote greater awareness of the experiences of disabled people, and to advocate for social change. (para. 2)

This definition provides a comprehensive view of the field, not only honoring the academic contributions but also recognizing disability on all levels and in all areas. An important aspect of DS is it does not just view disabled bodies as made wrong by the circumstances in which they exist, but instead, as a force of its own, refusing to fit into societal norms (Siebers, 2001). One may ask then what happens when this concept is applied to education. The DSE framework is analyzed in the following section to situate the research conducted in this study.

**Disability Studies in Education**

DSE has been a developing field that emerged as an alternative perspective to special education, viewing disability through the social model lens instead of the medical model (AERA, 2020; Connor et al., 2008). AERA (2020) stipulated:

> The tenets of Disability Studies in Education center on engagement in research, policy, and action that: contextualize disability within political and social spheres; privilege the interests, agendas, and voices of people labelled with disability/ disabled people; promote social justice, equitable and inclusive educational opportunities, and full and meaningful access to all aspects of society for people labelled with disability/ disabled people; assume competence and reject deficit models of disability. (pp. 447–448)

The current study contextualized disability in social spheres by analyzing the medical and social model of disability and how that impacts the access of students with ESN to GE curriculum and peers. According to Siebers (2001), "The medical model situates disability exclusively in individual bodies and strives to cure them by particular treatment, isolating the patient as diseased or defective" (p. 738). Words such as "cure," treatment," "patient," and "defective" provide insight into the fundamental tenets of this model of disability. Santrock (2011) referred to this concept as the medicalization of disability, highlighting this model creates

"cruel" attitudes toward people with disabilities and facilitates stigma that helps encourage segregation. In their book, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*, Linton (1998) noted this medicalization equates human difference with deviance, pathological condition with deficit, and "as an individual burden and personal tragedy" (p. 11). When applied to education, the medical model is at the foundation of special education (Lazerson, 1983).

At the time of this study, special education focused on what is needed, implying a deficit, to make the student fit into the norm; DSE challenges this notion. Taylor (2006) stated, "Disability is not viewed as a condition to be cured but rather as a difference to be accepted and accommodated. It is a social phenomenon through and through" (p. xix). This social phenomenon Taylor described refers to the social model of disability. Disability is viewed as a social construct in the social model of disability, where diversity is valued and celebrated in the DSE framework (Ferguson, 2006). Adopting a DSE perspective means claiming the value of a person's differences, viewing them as strengths, and using this diversity to inform how one approaches educating that student (Baglieri et al., 2011; Linton, 1998; Valle & Connor, 2019). Instead of blaming the student for lack of learning, responsibility is placed on the environment surrounding the student. Although the social model of disability challenges the medical model and focuses on humanistic practices of recognizing the strength of human diversity, it also comes with its challenges.

This study also aimed to promote inclusive educational opportunities for all students, including those with ESN. Santrock (2011) warned, "The constructionist model of disability may contribute not only to a zealous pursuit of inclusion at the expense of effective instruction but also to the demise of special education" (p. 368). This warning necessitates research such as the research addressed by this study. For many educators, the ultimate goal for SWD is full

inclusion. However, in this zealous pursuit, students with ESN may have been left out of the equation (Morningstar et al., 2017). Because full inclusion for these students may require more significant change, they are often not given the inclusive opportunities they deserve (Kurth et al., 2016). In pursuing full inclusion as the end goal, the ultimate end goal of quality of life fails to be emphasized.

Finally, this study highlighted the importance of presuming competence, which was included in the literature review as a necessary understanding when implementing educational practices to facilitate access to GE. These views of DS and DSE provided the core theoretical framework for this dissertation research.

## Review of Relevant Nonempirical and Empirical Literature

The final portion of this literature review includes expert opinions found in nonempirical literature and empirical literature that identify practices educators have used to facilitate access to inclusion opportunities for their students with significant disabilities and the voices and experiences of these educators. As postulated at the beginning of the chapter, the literature was collected and then analyzed through coding to identify significant themes. In the nonempirical literature, the following themes were determined as essential practices when facilitating access for students with ESN: (a) curriculum, (b) universal design for learning (UDL), (c) differentiated and embedded instruction, (d) assistive technology (AT), (e) peer interaction and support, (f) other miscellaneous classroom practices, (g) multitiered system of supports (MTSS), and (h) stakeholder collaboration. In the empirical literature, the themes identified included (a) IEP, (b) accommodations and modifications, (c) UDL, (d) peer interaction and support, (e) MTSS, (f) stakeholder collaboration, and (g) the teacher role. The final section reviews the limited research on ESN special educators' voices and experiences facilitating access. Following the detailed

review of the literature of these themes, the chapter ends with a discussion and a final summary. Information regarding these empirical studies, such as author(s), publication year, methodology, and journal name, can be found in Table 1, whereas additional articles can be found in Table 2.

**Table 1**

*Summary of Reviewed Literature and Methods*

| Author(s) | Year | Methodology | Source |
|---|---|---|---|
| Kurth, J. A., & Zagona, A. L. | 2018 | Quantitative, survey | Journal of Special Education |
| Kurth, J. A., Allcock, H., Walker, V., Olson, A., & Taub, D. | 2021 | Quantitative, survey | Teacher Education & Special Education |
| Kurth, J. A., Ruppar, A. L., Toews, S. G., McCabe, K. M., McQueston, J. A., & Johnston, R. | 2019 | Qualitative, content analysis | Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities |
| Kurth, J., Gross, M., Lovinger, S., & Catalano, T. | 2012 | Quantitative, survey | Journal of the International Association of Special Education |
| Lowrey, K. A., Hollingshead, A., Howery, K., & Bishop, J. B. | 2017 | Qualitative, narrative analysis | Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities |
| Mauer, K. J., Fischbacher, L., Fensterstock, N., & Osipova, A. V. | 2023 | Qualitative, case study | Journal of School Leadership |
| Olson, A., Leko, M. M., & Roberts, C. A. | 2016 | Qualitative, case study | Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities |
| Shogren, K. A., McCart, A. B., Lyon, K. J., & Sailor, W. S. | 2015 | Qualitative, narrative inquiry | Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities |
| Toews, S. G., Kurth, J. A., Turner, E. L., & Lyon, K. J. | 2020 | Qualitative, ecobehavioral analysis | Inclusion |

**Table 2**

*Summary of Additional Literature Details*

| Author(s) | Year | Type | Source |
|---|---|---|---|
| Agran, M., Jackson, L., Kurth, J. A., Ryndak, D., Burnette, K., Jameson, M., Zagona, A., Fitzpatrick, H., & Wehmeyer, M | 2020 | Analytic essay | Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities |
| Alquraini, T., & Gut, D. | 2012 | Literature review | International Journal of Special Education |
| Ashby, C., Burns, J., & Royle, J. | 2014 | Informational essay | Theory Into Practice |
| Ballard, S. L., & Dymond, S. K. | 2017 | Literature review | Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities |
| Kauffman, J. M., Travers, J. C., & Badar, J. | 2020 | Scholarly response paper | Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities |
| Kleinert, H. L. | 2020 | Scholarly response paper | Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities |
| Kurth, J. A., & Enyart, M. | 2016 | Informational Essay/Call to Action | Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities |
| Kurth, J. A., Zagona, A., Hagiwara, M., & Enyart, M. | 2017 | Literature review & content analysis | Division on Autism and Developmental Journals |
| Mortier, K. | 2020 | Conceptual essay | Journal of Inclusive Education |
| Quirk, C., Ryndak, D. L., & Taub, D. | 2017 | Literature review | Inclusion |
| Raley, S. K., Burke, K. M., Hagiwara, M., Shogren, K. A., Wehmeyer, M. L., & Kurth, J. A. | 2020 | Conceptual essay | Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities |
| Rogers, W., & Johnson, N. | 2018 | Literature review | Physical Disabilities: Education and Related Services |
| Ruppar, A. L., Allcock, H., & Gonsier-Gerdin, J. (2017). | 2017 | Literature review, theoretical framework | Remedial & Special Education |
| Ryndak, D., Jackson, L. B., & White, J. M. | 2013 | Informational essay | Inclusion |
| Sauer, J. S., & Jorgensen, C. M. | 2016 | Advocacy brief | Inclusion |

| Author(s) | Year | Type | Source |
|---|---|---|---|
| Saunders, A. F., Root, J. R., & Jimenez, B. A. | 2019 | Informational essay | Inclusion |
| Taub, D. A., McCord, J. A., & Ryndak, D. L. | 2017 | Informational essay | Journal of Special Education |
| Toews, S. G., & Kurth, J. A. | 2019 | Informational Essay/Call to Action | Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities |
| Trela, K., & Jimenez, B. A. | 2013 | Informational essay | Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities |
| Walker, V. L., Kurth, J., Carpenter, M. E., Tapp, M. C., Clausen, A., & Lockman Turner, E. | 2021 | Literature review | Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities |
| Wehmeyer, M. L., Shogren, K. A., Kurth, J. A., Morningstar, M. E., Kozleski, E. B., Agran, M., Jackson, L., Jameson, J. M., McDonnell, J., & Ryndak, D. L. | 2016 | Literature review | Advances in Special Education |

### Nonempirical Literature Findings

Educating all students revolves around what occurs in the classroom and those providing the instruction. Although there are many complex layers to the education system, practices can support educators in facilitating the successful inclusion of students with ESN in the classroom and school community.

### Curriculum

The nonempirical literature highlighted curriculum and access to curriculum as necessary pieces to facilitate the inclusion of ESN students because they require significant support in all areas. It also highlighted additional assistance to access the GE curriculum and, often, the "functional" curriculum, meaning "other curriculum relevant to students' individual needs" (Ballard & Dymond, 2017, p. 163). Authors commented on the importance of access to the GE curriculum aligned to the state-adopted standards (Quirk et al., 2017; Ryndak et al., 2013;

Saunders et al., 2019; Taub et al., 2017). Various accommodations, adaptations, and modifications are necessary to implement for students with ESN to access and gain maximum benefit from the GE curriculum (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Olson et al., 2016; Saunders et al., 2019; Trela & Jimenez, 2013).

**UDL**

Providing access to students with ESN in a way that facilitates inclusion is possible using UDL (Rogers & Johnson, 2018; Ryndak et al., 2013). Initially coined by Ronald L. Mace, UDL has a rich history that started outside of education. The Center for Applied Special Technology (2011) defined UDL as "an instructional design framework that addresses learner variability by facilitating the removal of barriers in the curriculum" (p. 225). The multiple methods of engagement, representation, action, and expression provide flexibility and allow students of all abilities to participate in various settings such as small or whole groups (Alquraini & Gut, 2012). According to Wehmeyer et al. (2016), the content becomes accessible through the different forms of engagement and representation, such as multimedia or kinesthetic activities. For those students who communicate differently (e.g., augmentative alternative communication [AAC] or simply more successful with spoken words than written), UDL allows for the different variations of action and expression. Instead of the student being the primary barrier to learning and inclusion, UDL reframes this position and focuses on the barrier's curriculum, instruction, and materials might present (Quirk et al., 2017; Taub et al., 2017).

**Differentiated and Embedded Instruction**

Additionally, the nonempirical literature frequently mentions differentiated instruction and embedded instruction. Some students require further individualized support in addition to UDL, which is called differentiated instruction (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Quirk et al., 2017;

Rogers & Johnson, 2018; Taub et al., 2017). Quirk et al. (2017) discussed differentiated instruction as "a process to approach teaching and learning for students of differing abilities in the same class" (p. 99). These differentiated supports can look very diverse but involve altering instruction or assignments, providing flexible grouping, and altering instruction following assessment (IRIS, 2010b; Taub et al., 2017). In embedded instruction, the additional supports students need are already built into the GE lesson and instruction (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Rogers & Johnson, 2018). This practice allows students to work on their IEP goals and participate in additional trials and repetition without disrupting existing routines, which can aid in the generalization of skills (Ryndak et al., 2013; Saunders et al., 2019). Multiple stakeholders can implement this instruction, such as paraprofessionals, teachers, or peers (Quirk et al., 2017).

**Assistive Technology**

Assistive technology (AT) was also distinguished in the nonempirical literature as a practice facilitating inclusion. Under the IDEA (2004), AT is defined as "any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of a child with a disability" (§ 300.5). Consisting of both low-tech and high-tech options, AT has the goal of allowing students with ESN to "more effectively participate" (Alquraini & Gut, 2012, p. 51). Low-tech AT can include adapted utensils such as an easy-grip crayon or adapted spoons and switches that enable students to communicate or participate with simple responses (Rogers & Johnson, 2018; Saunders et al., 2019). High-tech AT refers to items such as an alternative keyboard, text-to-speech software, and AAC (Alquraini & Gut, 2012).

Students with ESN often have complex communication needs; yet, as H. L. Kleinert (2020) concluded, many lack communicative competence and do not have a formal form of

communication. Initially defined by Light in 1989, communicative competence is "a relative and dynamic, interpersonal construct based on functionality of communication, adequacy of communication, sufficiency of knowledge" (p. 1) and judgment and skill in the following areas: linguistic, operational, social, and strategic competence. Communicative competence serve as a foundation for access as the lack of it often serves as a barrier to inclusion (J. Kleinert et al., 2019). Functional communication and AAC were noted as avenues that can help facilitate the inclusion of students with ESN to demonstrate learning and participate in their schooling (Quirk et al., 2017). Quirk et al. (2017) defined AAC as including "all forms of communication (other than oral speech) to express thoughts, needs, wants, and ideas" (p. 101).

Communication systems as a method to facilitate the inclusion of students with ESN were referenced 11 times in the nonempirical literature (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; H. L. Kleinert, 2020; Quirk et al., 2017; Raley et al., 2020; Rogers & Johnson, 2018; Ryndak et al., 2013; Saunders et al., 2019; Taub et al., 2017; Toews & Kurth, 2019; Walker et al., 2021). Supports need to be built into the school day to ensure access across all settings and that the chosen system is implemented with fidelity (Ryndak et al., 2013). Students can demonstrate what they have learned and their progress in their academics through AAC (Taub et al., 2017). In three articles, AAC was cited as an avenue to assist students with ESN in engaging in instruction, particularly for literacy but also in math (Saunders et al., 2019; Taub et al., 2017; Toews & Kurth, 2019). Implementation across settings and throughout their day also provides students with access to peers without disabilities and encourages self-determination skills (Raley et al., 2020; Walker et al., 2021).

### Peer Interaction and Support

Finally, Ballard and Dymond (2017) indicated an essential aspect of including students with ESN is providing opportunities for interacting and developing relationships with their peers without disabilities. This interaction can support and facilitate inclusion and instruction in multiple ways, including general social skills, peer-assisted learning, and cooperative learning (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Ruppar et al., 2017; Ryndak et al., 2013). Toews and Kurth (2019) referred to peer-assisted learning as an "effective and practical" way to support students with ESN. Peers without disabilities can support their peers with ESN by providing additional reviews, minor supports, or models, all of which naturally occur when students are educated in the same classroom (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Quirk et al., 2017; Saunders et al., 2019). Students with ESN benefit from being included with their peers. For example, these benefits include increased communication, enhanced relationships, development of social skills, and adaptive behavior (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Ruppar et al., 2017; Ryndak et al., 2012).

### Other Classroom Practices

Additional practices found in the nonempirical research included using an ecological framework to personalize access (Trela & Jimenez, 2013); employing consistent, repeated support and using task analysis (Saunders et al., 2019); using student interests (Quirk et al., 2017); progress monitoring (Ashby et al., 2014); preteaching necessary skills (Ryndak et al., 2013); inquiry learning (Alquraini & Gut, 2012); providing nonverbal cues (Quirk et al., 2017); visual supports (Ryndak et al., 2013; Saunders et al., 2019); and providing wait time for students to process (Rogers & Johnson, 2018).

**MTSS**

Although the following practices are more school than classroom-based, these items directly impact what occurs in the classroom daily. Wehmeyer et al. (2016) noted commitment to ensuring both the academic and behavioral success of all students can be addressed through MTSS. This framework has arisen as a possible way to support and include students and their unique needs across all domains of their education (Agran et al., 2020). Wehmeyer et al. (2016) further reasoned that "interventions can be embedded within general education instruction and activities" (p. 145). Within the MTSS framework is response to intervention (RTI), which addresses academic needs and positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) to address social and emotional needs (Quirk et al., 2017). In the literature, schoolwide positive behavior interventions and supports (SWPBIS) and PBIS were confirmed as best practices for including students with ESN in the classroom and school community (Agran et al., 2020; Quirk et al., 2017; Kurth & Enyart, 2016; Kurth et al., 2017; Wehmeyer et al., 2016). SWPBIS can, when implemented with fidelity, serve as a meaningful way to meet the needs of students with ESN in GE settings because more intensive support is in addition to, not in replacement of, existing supports (Kurth & Enyart, 2016; Kurth et al., 2017). Although part of SWPBIS and MTSS, PBIS is also a best practice in its own right. Kurth et al. (2017) recognized a long track record of success when using PBIS with students with ESN. Simple adaptations to the educational environment such as having an explicit set routine, schedule, clear expectations, frequent or systematic breaks, and positive reinforcement set students up for success (Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Saunders et al., 2019). PBIS were shown to mitigate the need for further intense interventions when done correctly (Quirk et al., 2017; Shogren et al., 2015).

### *Stakeholder Collaboration*

To include the practices communicated thus far to be effectively implemented and for students with ESN in the classroom, stakeholder collaboration and supports are essential (Agran et al., 2020; Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Mortier, 2020; Ryndak et al., 2007; Shogren et al., 2015). Stakeholders in the school setting have been determined through the literature as administration and leadership, teachers, other school personnel, family, and community (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Mortier, 2020; Shogren et al., 2015). The practices illustrated include but are not limited to the accountability of implementation and mutual responsibility and ownership through successful collaboration and communication (Agran et al., 2020; Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Quirk et al., 2017). Additionally, practices have the goal of a common vision that can help facilitate sustainable systemic change (Agran et al., 2020). Ryndak et al. (2007) stated, "When considering systemic change efforts related to building inclusive schools, a common vision of services should incorporate inclusive education, services for all students, and roles of adults at various levels (e.g., classroom, school, district) that facilitate those services" (p. 8).

Creating an inclusive school environment requires administration and leadership to be "strong, distributed and collaborative" (Quirk et al., 2017). Alquraini and Gut (2012) called administrators key players and noted they could be active participants in creating and implementing activities that support the successful inclusion of students with ESN. In addition to administrators, Giangreco and Doyle's (2002) work stipulated the importance of paraprofessional support for SWD and their access to education. Paraprofessionals facilitate much of this support, and the literature frequently attested to the importance of their role in including students with ESN (Walker et al., 2021). For paraprofessionals to be as effective and

meaningful as possible, the following items are crucial: training before, during, and after the intervention; modeling and practicing necessary interventions or duties; and regular feedback and supervision (Ruppar et al., 2017; Walker et al., 2021).

Ultimately, collaboration between all school personnel and student families is necessary to support overall student success (Ashby et al., 2014; Mortier, 2020). Participation from parents and guardians is not only legally required, but also their advocacy has historically advanced the rights of people with disabilities and inclusive efforts in schools (Ruppar et al., 2017). According to Alquraini and Gut (2012), strong partnerships with families for those with and without SWD invite valuable allies to the conversation, encourage problem solving, increase communication among all stakeholders, and allow for a positive narrative.

## Empirical Literature Findings

In the literature collected for this literature review, many practices were confirmed to facilitate inclusion of ESN students. However, only 9 of the 30 discovered were actual empirical studies, showing a gap in the literature. The empirical literature included quantitative and qualitative research studies, including surveys, content analyses, narrative analyses, and case studies. The research studies and their findings are communicated in detail in the following sections, representing the following themes found in the literature: IEPs, accommodations and modifications, UDL, peer interaction, MTSS, stakeholder collaboration, and the teacher's role.

### *IEP*

As students with ESN continue to be placed in segregated settings (Brock, 2018), a frequent argument used to support this segregation is the unique needs of students with ESN cannot be met in the GE instructional setting (Kurth et al., 2019). This argument is typically defined through the LRE statements on students' IEP (Kurth et al., 2019). In this content analysis

study, Kurth et al. (2019) analyzed 88 IEPs of students with ESN who showed a range of demographics and placement options. The inclusion levels were determined for approximately 52% of the IEPs, with almost half of those in self-contained settings. The remaining students were equally distributed among resource and inclusive settings. The IEP placement statements analyzed through coding uncovered a total of 279 factors. These factors were then recoded for themes, and five main factors were found: (a) curricular and instructional domain, (b) environmental domain, (c) problematic statements domain, (d) student domain, and (e) personnel domain.

In the curricular and instructional domain, the specification of students needing "specially designed instruction" (Kurth et al., 2019, p. 8), specific interventions, or alternative curricula were found in 28.1% of LRE statements as rationalizations for more restrictive placements. Kurth et al. (2019) also found in the environmental domain, 23.1% of statements contained citations of the "continuum" (e.g., specific segregated settings) and found GE to be inadequate to meet the unique needs of students. Problematic statements accounted for 21% of the statements, which Kurth et al. presented as not individualized, measurable, or specific enough. Also listed in statements were student characteristics—comprising 19.6% of comments—described student deficits, labels, behavior, and other miscellaneous needs. In the final domain, personnel, which accounted for 8.2% of the statements, related services, and student support staff were noted. Essentially, nearly every LRE statement could be characterized as a description of why students should be taught outside of the GE setting. Often, these justifications hinged on perceived incapacities of students with ESN to benefit from GE settings or curricula, including needs for specific interventions, types of instruction, type of curriculum, and student support needs (Kurth et al., 2019).

### *Accommodations and Modifications*

Within these IEP documents are individualized supports referred to as accommodations and modifications that are often used to facilitate access to GE for students with ESN. Accommodations indicate a change to instruction that "allows a student to access the information fully and to accurately demonstrate knowledge" (IRIS, 2010a, p. 3). They do not change the task's content, expectations, or requirements. A modification is a "change to instruction or curriculum that alters either the content of that instruction or student performance expectations" (IRIS, 2010a, p. 12). Modifications do change the expectations and requirements of an assignment, and the following factors must be considered: "students' learning level, learning style, skills, needs, and demands of the content" (Olson et al., 2016, p. 150).

Olson et al.'s (2016) qualitative case study, which employed purposeful sampling, highlighted Ridgeview Middle School and three students with ESN who were included for most of their school day. Researchers recruited 12 people as participants for the study, including "two administrators, six GE teachers, one inclusion support teacher, two learning strategists, and one educational assistant" (Olson et al., 2016, p. 146). An essential finding of Olson et al.'s study showed responsibility of educating students with ESN fell to all personnel, not just special education teachers. Educational personnel planned curriculum instruction intentionally and specified various accommodations, adaptations, and modifications that might be needed to meet the unique needs of the students best. Furthermore, findings attested that multiple factors influenced decisions regarding student learning environments, such as student needs, teaching styles, curriculum components, and peer participation.

In their ecobehavioral analysis of 10 students with ESN, Toews et al. (2020) found academic content was accessed through accommodations and modifications in 76.1% of

observations. These included but were not limited to graphic organizers, simplified questions, reteaching, and individualized adult support. These accommodations were delivered primarily by paraprofessionals, general educators, special educators, and peers without disabilities. It is essential to note these supports were provided in a fully included setting. The research study found these students with ESN did not engage in maladaptive behaviors in 69.7% of observations. The students appeared to be highly engaged, and results attested that this was due to the "high level of access to academic content" (Toews et al., 2020, p. 270). Additionally, Toews et al. (2020) found educator attention was focused on students in 89% of observations instead of lower levels found in special education classrooms by Kurth et al.'s (2016) study.

Kurth et al.'s (2012) study highlighted access to GE for students with ESN, in which 139 teachers participated in an anonymous survey regarding modifications and grading practices of students with ESN. The study participants consisted of 117 GE teachers and 22 special education teachers across elementary, middle, and high schools. Findings in grading showed wide variability in the comfort of general and special educators grading abilities and a difference between elementary and secondary teachers. GE teachers demonstrated less knowledge of grading students receiving special education services and rarely used specialized rubrics. Student progress toward their IEP goals and special education teachers appeared to more readily understand their level of effort. In the area of modifications, elementary teachers were found to use them more than secondary teachers with their students with ESN.

In Kurth et al.'s (2012) study, data suggested special education teachers could identify modifications being used more readily than GE teachers. This finding was reinforced further by the finding that GE teachers were more likely to report the responsibility of making modifications falls on the special education teacher or paraprofessional. To conclude their study,

teachers were given the opportunity to express additional feelings on the subject. Of the 61 teachers who responded, 44% reported lacking time, resources, and expertise to implement modifications appropriately in inclusive settings. Kurth et al. (2012) indicated, "A quarter of the teachers also reported believing that student success was paramount and that modifications enabled students to be successful in inclusive settings" (p. 50). In addition to accommodations, adaptations, and modifications, access to the GE curriculum can occur through various evidence-based practices such as UDL.

### *UDL*

Using UDL to facilitate inclusion of students with ESN was frequently mentioned in the nonempirical literature. However, in the empirical research, only one article highlighted it. Lowrey et al.'s (2017) study described UDL by stating, "Through intentional planning, educators can address the variability of learners' ability to access and understand information, engage with content and instruction, and express what they know" (p. 225). Their study used narrative inquiry to analyze GE teachers employed in a district implementing UDL. These teachers also had to have "at least one student with a severe ID included in their class" (Lowrey et al., 2017, p. 228). These criteria created an obstacle for the researchers, so they were expanded to include moderate to severe intellectual disability. Researchers considered seven participants who were subsequently interviewed. Four major themes were ascertained: "(a) designing for learner variability, (b) talking about inclusion, (c) teaming fosters success, and (d) differing descriptions of UDL" (Lowrey et al., 2017, p. 225).

For the first theme in Lowrey et al.'s (2017) study—designing for learner variability—participants voiced how intentionally using UDL as an instructional practice allowed for access for all students "regardless of their diversity and level of needs" (p. 233). All participants attested

that UDL could be used to address barriers to instruction because it allowed for instruction to be tailored to each learner. In the second theme—talking about inclusion—the authors ascertained a "clear connection between UDL implementation and inclusive practices" in all participant stories (Lowrey et al., 2017, p. 232). Although differing definitions of UDL have been confirmed, all participants in Lowrey et al.'s study attested to the importance of professional development and additional support to further the extent to which UDL was being implemented with fidelity. Lowrey et al. also discovered the importance and benefit of peer support.

**Peer Interaction and Support**

A participant in Lowrey et al.'s (2017) study found peer support highly beneficial to students with ESN. Trained at the beginning of the year, these students without disabilities were able to provide ongoing assistance to the SWD. The teacher confirmed gains in communication and attributed them to this setup. In Olson et al.'s (2016) study, participants confirmed peer support was an effective practice that contributed to the facilitation of inclusion for students with ESN. The peer support included academic assistance and social and behavioral support. The authors established, "Peers were integral to supporting students with severe disabilities both academically and behaviorally" (Olson et al., 2016, p. 151). Although encountered only briefly, Olson et al. determined peer support was a concrete finding derived from stories directly from participants. Although both settings in Lowrey's and Olson et al.'s studies mainly included students with ESN, the importance of peer support in this inclusion was evaluated as an educational practice that aids in facilitating access for students with ESN.

**MTSS**

Creating and maintaining a positive and strong school culture is essential to including students with ESN (Shogren et al., 2015). MTSS consists of RTI, PBIS and SWPBIS. Kurth and

Zagona's (2018) study surveyed 305 public school SWPBIS coaches, representing 58% of the diverse school districts involved in the Midwest states' SWPBIS training. Most participants were women and worked at the elementary level as GE teachers.

When discussing the findings from their study, Kurth and Zagona (2018) acknowledged how including students with ESN in SWPBIS, although it does not always occur, could greatly benefit these students by addressing significant behavioral needs in the GE setting. Participation of students with ESN taught in separate settings was rated less important than for those taught in GE settings. Although often involved in the incentive-based portions of the SWPBIS program, Kurth and Zagona did not observe explicit behavior expectations taught to students with ESN consistently. Responses varied in knowledge of the procedure of dealing with the behavior needs of students with ESN; however, only "41.5% of general educators surveyed attested that they did not know if there was a crisis plan for responding for dangerous situations involving students with ESN" (Kurth & Zagona, 2018, p. 139). Findings documented limited involvement of GE teachers in providing support for students with ESN. The authors stated to ensure inclusion of students with ESN, all school personnel must be familiar with the various needs and responses to potential challenging behaviors to best support and ensure PBIS is implemented across all school settings.

**Stakeholder Collaboration**

Stakeholders in the school setting were established through the literature as administration and leadership, teachers, other school personnel, and family and community (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Mortier, 2020; Shogren et al., 2015). Shogren et al.'s 2015 study highlighted stakeholder collaboration centered around the Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT) Center and its efforts to "integrate(s) research on inclusive educational

practices and critical features of systemic school reform as a framework for schools, districts, and state education agencies to promote lasting and sustainable change" (p. 173). Six schools, also known as knowledge development sites, were confirmed through a nomination to participate in surveys, interviews, and site visits. Findings suggested educator buy-in to inclusion is "a vital cultural condition" and cited the need for a "true culture shift" (Shogren et al., 2015, p. 180).

This buy-in included collaboration to support all students, even those with ESN, and found a robust educator support system is imperative for students with ESN to be included (Shogren et al., 2015). Collaborative cultures, open communication, positive and professional learning communities, and continued professional development were all cited as types of support teachers needed (Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Lowrey et al., 2017; Olson et al., 2016; Quirk et al., 2017; Shogren et al., 2015). This finding was also briefly commented on in Lowrey et al.'s (2017) study in which the authors attested that meaningful inclusion of students with ESN was best facilitated by stakeholder collaboration. Collaboration that included family was also ascertained as important, as the participation of parents and guardians is not only legally required, but also their advocacy has historically advanced the rights of people with disabilities and inclusive efforts in schools (Ruppar et al., 2017; Shogren et al., 2015). Finally, both school- and district-level leaders' buy-in was asserted as necessary to support an inclusive school culture; this included practices such as having an open-door policy, ensuring communication among stakeholders, and providing site leadership (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Mortier, 2020; Shogren et al., 2015). Mauer et al.'s (2023) study also detailed the importance of system of collaboration between educational stakeholders.

In Olson et al.'s (2016) study, 12 stakeholder participants were part of a case study that sought to determine how various educational stakeholders "define and provide access to the GE

curriculum" (p. 145) for students with ESN. An initial questionnaire was administered, and then participants were interviewed multiple times by various authors. Results found educational personnel can support students through "shared responsibility, collaboration, peer supports, and multi-faceted learning structures" (Olson et al., 2016, p. 143). Collaboration was cited as an "essential component" to providing access and was found across all stakeholders involved (Olson et al., 2016, p. 151).

**Teacher Role**

For students with ESN to be included with their GE peers, the literature communicated the importance of having high expectations and a strengths-based approach (Kurth et al., 2021; Lowrey et al., 2017). A Delphi study conducted by Kurth et al. (2021) found high expectations to be the most essential quality for teachers of ESN students. The purpose of the study was to further the research and gain consensus on developing expertise and skills for teachers of students with ESN in inclusive contexts and on their preparation programs to gain consensus around necessary skills for teachers (Kurth et al., 2021). Faculty were selected to participate in the study because they had expertise in this area. Participants ranked various skills of teachers of students with ESN.

Additionally, Kurth et al.'s (2021) study posited the importance of a teacher's ability to individualize supports, use research-based practices, have collaboration skills, and advocate for their students. Teacher system-level support and ongoing professional development were also determined to be factors essential to inclusive education. The article affirmed teacher advocacy for student success and proclaimed the "importance of teacher leadership skills to promote and facilitate inclusive practices" (Kurth et al., 2021, p. 128). Furthermore, using an inclusive lens and valuing advocacy were noted as the most important skills (Kurth et al., 2021).

## Special Education Teacher Voices

Due to the importance of the special education teacher's role in facilitating access for their students, understanding the present literature on their voices, perspectives, and experiences is essential. Unfortunately, similar to the previous information examined, limited research exists. Approximately 17 articles were obtained in an initial search, and upon further review, 13 were empirical in nature. Of those 13 articles, only eight stipulated students with ESN, five confirmed inclusion efforts, and two specified the voice and perspectives of special educators.

In the first study, Gee and Gonsier-Gerdin (2018) used a collective case study to emphasize 10 1st-year ESN special education teachers' experiences in self-contained settings. The study followed the educators throughout their 1st year of teaching and an increase in teacher ability and confidence was documented. The segregated setting was an established barrier and limitation that required significant effort on behalf of the educators to mitigate while making efforts to facilitate access to GE curriculum and peers. The lack of access to curriculum and resources reinforced the segregation and subsequent barriers they experienced.

In the second study, 13 beginning special education teacher voices were illuminated through a survey (Conderman & Stephens, 2000). The article involved teachers in a variety of settings, including those educating students with ESN. Findings suggested the importance of collaboration among educational stakeholders and the difficulty of balancing the wide variety of student needs. One participant elaborated on this and stated, "Most challenging to me is making inclusion meaningful for my students" (Conderman & Stephens, 2000, p. 17). The researchers called for additional support for beginning teachers.

Attempting to facilitate access to GE curriculum and peers for students with ESN in self-contained settings presents a unique and complex challenge (Conderman & Stephens, 2000; Gee

& Gonsier-Gerdin, 2018). The challenges special educators have experienced has contributed to the shortage of teachers (Rood & Ashby, 2020). The implications of this literature review are commented on in the following section.

## Discussion

This review aimed to identify practices educators could use to facilitate access to inclusive opportunities with ESN in the GE classroom and school community. Although inclusion is a complex issue with many contributing factors, there are students with ESN in classrooms nationwide and practitioners who try to include them (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Within the literature, actionable ways for practitioners to facilitate inclusion were illustrated. These included both classroom- and school-based practices in empirical and nonempirical literature. School-based practices were included in this literature review because these practices directly impact what occurs in the classroom and can be used by educators; additionally, the current research study took place in this setting. Nonempirical literature was included because it comprised 21 of the 29 articles in this review and illustrated valuable background and context to the issue of including students with ESN.

The literature reviewed established excellent and actionable practices that can be implemented. The empirical and nonempirical research included UDL, ways to provide access through accommodations and modifications, peer interaction and support, MTSS, and stakeholder collaboration. Coteaching and communication were specified frequently in the nonempirical literature but rarely in empirical studies. Furthermore, the research showed the perspectives and voices of special education teachers yielded extremely limited research (Conderman & Stephens, 2000; Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2018). The literature provides a reminder that educators of students with ESN have been hindered by systemic segregation.

Existing in a system set to exclude their students reinforces the difficulties educators experience when attempting to facilitate access.

This systemic segregation was evident in Kauffman et al.'s (2020) study. Out of the 29 articles discovered for this literature review, only one argued against the inclusion of students with ESN. In response to Agran et al.'s (2020) article, Kauffman et al. (2020) illustrated why they felt students with severe disabilities should not be placed in GE. Kauffman et al.'s article lacked acknowledgement that placement in segregated settings contributes to segregation in other areas of life. Also missing was acknowledgment that the unique needs of students with ESN and the skills they may need to be explicitly taught can occur within the GE setting. Kauffman et al. (2020) offered, "We are supportive of placement in general education for children with severe disabilities when it is appropriate" (p. 28). However, the article did not provide examples of what is appropriate other than when students with severe disabilities are intellectually capable of making "satisfactory" progress toward the GE curriculum. One of the most challenging aspects of including students with ESN is simply establishing the belief that they have the right to be included in all settings.

All practices discussed in this review, except Kauffman et al.'s (2020) article, began with the authors expressing an explicit assumption that students with ESN have the right to be educated with their peers without disabilities. Throughout the literature, the concept of presuming competence was directly and indirectly referred to frequently. With its origins stemming from Donnellan's (1984) criterion of the least dangerous assumption "where educators teach in a way that leaves open the greatest possibility/opportunity for development" (as cited in Biklen, 2020, p. 235), the presumption of competence believes all students have the capacity, ability, and potential to learn (Biklen & Burke, 2007). It is important to note although there has

been a significant amount of research for and against this concept, facilitated communication was not the focus of the literature in this review. As documented in Kurth et al.'s (2019) study, student disability labels and significant needs have been often used to rationalize their exclusion. These "unsubstantiated assumptions" (Kurth et al., 2019, p. 14) often do not result in people treating students with dignity and respect, and these assumptions become ingrained in systems. Essential to the inclusion of students with ESN is the presumption of competence and the belief that all students can learn (Biklen, 2020). Although the increase in DS in education and the social model of disability has continued, the articles in this review lacked a direct link between these theories and the practices listed. This discrepancy between theory and practice has permeated the literature and directly affected educators transitioning from credential programs into the classroom.

### Paucity of Relevant Literature

There is a significant and glaring paucity of empirical literature regarding practices facilitating inclusion of students with ESN. Only a small portion of the articles discovered for this review were empirically based research articles as opposed to nonempirical literature, which consisted of literature reviews, informational essays, or conceptual papers. Additional research to test the implementation of best practices illustrated in this review would be meaningful and helpful to educators. Also, students with ESN have continued to be placed in segregated settings, so analysis of these best practices in those settings is needed.

Including students with ESN has been a discussion for far longer than the 10 years prior this study. However, this review needed to limit the time criteria to 10 years (2011–2021) to determine a set number of articles. It would be most beneficial to inform future research if the period for this review could be expanded to include additional years of research. Because this

area is a niche topic, to accurately determine what researchers in the field have been discussing concerning the inclusion of students with ESN, an additional 15 years of research would be needed to yield additional insights. The decision to restrict articles to only those in the United States was made because it was the study's projected location; however, this was both a limitation and an area for future research. The education of SWD is international, and many studies conducted outside of the United States could add valuable insight to the conversation.

The input and views of people with ESN on their inclusion or lack thereof have been noticeably lacking. The slogan "Nothing about us, without us" from the Disability Rights movement seems highly applicable in this case (Charlton, 2000). Out of the stakeholders established in the literature, the student or adult with ESN was missing. Further research in this vein would provide unique and meaningful input.

Additionally, the criteria for this review specified educational practices, but the literature alluded to the role of teacher education programs in the inclusion of students with ESN. This note found in the literature was often attributed to the separate credentialing programs teachers complete. Although mentioned briefly, further research to identify the relationship between teacher education programs and the inclusion of students with ESN would significantly contribute to this topic. Progress in this area has occurred more recently. Specifically, the Commission on Teacher Credentialing (2024) provided insight into the structural changes occurring to the credentials to address this need for more common knowledge between general and special education. These changes specifically aim to include UDL, MTSS, and coteaching.

The final and most significant gap in the literature was the lack of research conducted in segregated settings, where most students with ESN are educated. Most of the research conducted in this review was conducted in fully included settings, despite data showing most students with

ESN are not educated in these settings. To support the students and teachers currently in segregated settings, this alarming gap in research was addressed in this current study.

## Summary

Over the 46 years since the passage of EAHC, progress toward including SWD has been made. However, students with ESN have been continually left out of the equation despite the progress. This study focused on the how special educators implement classroom-based practices to facilitate access for their students with ESN and their experiences. The following themes were found in the empirical and nonempirical research: (a) UDL, (b) ways to provide access through accommodations and modifications, (c) peer interaction and support, (d) MTSS, and (e) stakeholder collaboration. A significant portion of the literature referenced instructional practices regarding curriculum, including accommodations, adaptations and modifications, and methods of instruction. The main methods of instruction stipulated in the literature were UDL, differentiated instruction, embedded instruction, and accommodations and modifications. Also included in the literature were peer interaction and support. MTSS were frequently specified at the school level, including PBIS and SWPBIS.

These practices were not only practices in the facilitation of inclusion but were also best practices for meeting the needs of all students (Alquraini & Gut, 2012). The second overarching theme at the school level was stakeholder collaboration and support, which consisted of administration and leadership, teachers, other school personnel, family, and the community. Opposing views were also communicated, and limitations to this review and implications for future research were explored.

The research suggested for inclusion to be successful, the very presence of students with ESN must be an already accepted standard, which refers to the assumption detailed in Chapter

1—the presumption of competence. When segregated placements are available, students are placed there. However, although students exist in a system where restrictive environments are federally and legally sanctioned, it is essential for educators to understand how to best work within the system. Students with ESN are currently in these segregated settings and have a fundamental right to experience opportunities to learn with their GE peers. Additionally, it is essential for educators to hear the voices of the educators attempting to facilitate this access so they can understand these phenomena.

The most poignant gaps identified through this literature review showed 7 of the 10 empirical research studies chosen were conducted in either fully included or mostly included settings. Researchers have posited students with ESN have been educated in segregated settings. Yet, most scholarly literature, textbooks, and teacher preparation programs have intently advocated for strategies to support fully inclusive educational environments (Kurth et al., 2012; Lowrey et al., 2017; Olson et al., 2016; Shogren et al., 2015; Toews et al., 2020). However, researchers have failed to address current students with ESN receiving special education services in these segregated settings. Although change has been made on a systemic level to encourage their inclusion, these changes need to be faster to have meaningful effects for students. The second gap ascertained was the extremely limited research on the voices, perspectives, and experiences of special education ESN teachers. Only two articles were discovered in this area, demonstrating an area for future research.

This chapter focused on describing (a) the historical background relevant to the study, (b) the theoretical framework of the study, and (c) the current literature related to the topic of the study. Chapter 3 includes the study's research questions and problem statement, the chosen

research methodology, and the design, including participant selection, sources of data, validity, reliability, data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

Although progress has been made toward inclusion of students with disabilities (SWD), students with extensive support needs (ESN) have continued to be educated in restrictive placements for most of their school day (Cosier et al., 2020). However, research surrounding their inclusion has often been conducted in fully included settings (Kurth et al., 2012, 2021; Lowrey et al., 2017; Olson et al., 2016; Shogren et al., 2015; Toews et al., 2020). This practice has left most students with significant disabilities and their teachers out of the imperative conversation of inclusion and needs to be addressed. Research has also reinforced the importance of special education teachers' efforts in facilitating access for their students with ESN and the need for further work on the experiences (Conderman & Stephens, 2000; Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2018). The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify how educators facilitate access to inclusion opportunities for students with ESN in K–12 education, including identifying what educational practices they use and what challenges and barriers they experience.

This chapter examines various research designs, specifically qualitative methodology and case study design, and how it has been used in school-based case study research. To adequately address this topic, a brief background of research inquiry and qualitative research in education is provided, followed by a review of case study design, in which the various tenets of case study research are explored. The population stipulated in this study is explained as well as the selection of participants. Data instrumentation; the various sources of data; and data collection, management, and analysis are investigated. These sections include the study's credibility, reliability, various ethical considerations, and limitations of the study.

## Research Questions

A research question should provide the goal, purpose, and direction of the study and should be general in nature (McMillan, 2012). In this explanatory and descriptive case study, the following research questions were created, with the insight and support from an expert panel, to address the important phenomena in question, providing access for students with ESN.

1. How do educators in self-contained settings facilitate access to general education curriculum and peers for students with ESN? At the teacher/classroom level? At the school level? At the district/community level?
2. What educational practices do educators in self-contained settings use to facilitate access to general education curriculum and peers?
3. What challenges and barriers do educators in self-contained settings encounter when facilitating access to general education curriculum and peers?

A qualitative case study research design was selected as the best approach to answer these research questions because it allowed for the phenomena in question to be analyzed with enough depth to add to the present literature on the subject and inform future research. Each educator included in the participant selection was their own case unit, creating a collective study. A total of nine educators of students with ESN that were not included for most of their school day were identified. Each participant was interviewed and related sources of data such as documentation of the practices communicated were included. In the following section, research methodologies used in the study are defined and a rationale for the chosen design is elucidated.

## Subjectivity Statement

Prior to delving into the methodology used in this dissertation, it is important to situate myself as a researcher. At the time of this study, I was a 33-year-old, White, cisgender, middle-

class, English speaking, female. Furthermore, at the time of this study, I was an individual who did not have a disability and as such was, as Goodley (2017) would say, temporarily able-bodied. I received a bachelor's degree in U.S. history with a minor in political science in 2012. Immediately following this, I entered the teacher education program and began working as a special education aide. I received a Master of Arts in special education and a moderate/severe education specialist credential in 2015.

I have participated in the field of special education in a variety of ways, including but not limited to serving as an aide, teacher, and program specialist. As an aide, I was placed as a one-to-one support for a student in a moderate-severe classroom. During this time, I felt I had found my "niche." As a teacher, I have taught at a segregated site, in a self-contained classroom, and in an independent study charter school setting. I encountered significant obstacles in my efforts to provide access for my students with ESN. I made efforts to provide inclusive opportunities for my students but quickly realized that this work was extremely impacted by forces outside of my control. At the time of this study, I was in my 3rd year as a special education program specialist where I supported teachers, families, and students with ESN.

In the 10 years prior to this study, I encountered reoccurring instances of low expectations for my students and friends with significant disabilities. These experiences greatly impacted my dedication to this endeavor by reinforcing the need for this research and work. As I continue my journey in the field of special education, and now DS, I continue to experience the tension between holding ideals incompatible with the present system. I believe my experiences and continued efforts in this area have positioned me to participate in the qualitative research of how educators facilitate access for their students with ESN.

## Research Methodology

Scientific inquiry is the "continual process of rigorous reasoning supported by a dynamic interplay among methods, theories, and findings" (National Research Council [NRC], 2002, p. 2). Guided by a core set of principles, research can attempt to "explain natural phenomena and understand the underlying relationships and then, [use] this information, to predict and influence behavior" (McMillan, 2012, p. 6). The NRC (2002) stated the scientific approach to inquiry includes six principles. These principles include (a) posing significant questions that can be investigated; (b) linking educational research to relevant theory; (c) using methods that permit direct investigation of the question; (d) providing a coherent, explicit, and evidence-based chain of reasoning; (e) replicating and generalizing across settings; and (f) disclosing research to encourage professional scrutiny, critique, and peer review. These principles require thorough, methodical, and impartial methods to gain valuable knowledge (McMillan, 2012). Regardless of the field of study and type of research, it must be a diligent attempt with fidelity to understand nature (Kuhn, 2012).

In their book *Research Design*, Creswell and Creswell (2018) highlighted three main approaches to research: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. Qualitative research focuses on examining the meaning people place on something. The quantitative research approach tests objective hypotheses by analyzing the relationship between variables. Mixed methods research requires collecting and integrating both qualitative and quantitative data. A researcher's philosophical worldview and the phenomena in question drive the type of inquiry used in a given scenario.

Throughout the history of science, positivist views—or "normal science" (Kuhn, 2012, p. 36), have dominated the field of scientific inquiry. This quantitative method has focused on

objectivity, testing of hypotheses, and verification and generalization of results (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hoy & Adams, 2016). In education, quantitative research is often used through experimental and nonexperimental designs as a data collection method to gain an in-depth understanding of various phenomena and trends (Hoy & Adams, 2016). However, a particular problem or phenomenon sometimes requires different inquiry methods to effectively document and analyze unique lived experiences (Bhattacharya, 2017). Qualitative research allows for diverse socially constructed realities to be viewed in a way that social scientists, and hopefully populations at large, can learn from them. Focused on meaning in context, qualitative research requires data to be collected so participants' lived experiences can be documented with little disruption to their environment (Merriam, 2001). Therefore, the research methodology chosen for this dissertation was qualitative methodology.

Qualitative research consists of many "strategies of inquiry," each with different aspects that make them more applicable to the study questions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). In their book *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, Creswell and Poth (2018) maintained there are five main approaches to inquiry in qualitative research, including narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. Each strategy of inquiry allows participants' lived experiences to be explored and assessed differently (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). In the next section, a brief history of qualitative research in education is analyzed to provide a foundation for this choice of methodology.

**Qualitative Research in Education**

In the early to mid-1900s, the United States transformed into a world power of "economic and political domination" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 5). According to Bailey (2014), quantitative research dominated scientific inquiry across all disciplines, but with this

transformation came various schools of thought regarding social scientific inquiry. Psychologist and mathematician Lazarsfeld confirmed an early bridge to the gap between quantitative and qualitative social research with his work (American Sociological Association, 2020). Bailey (2014) noted Lazarsfeld's extensive research career focused on mass communications, market research, political sociology, mathematical sociology, and social research. Through Bailey's work, qualitative and quantitative research methods were developed; this work included survey research, in-depth interviews, and new ways of considering "why?" questions (Bailey, 2014, p. 178).

While Lazarsfeld and others were bringing new avenues of inquiry into the social sciences, U.S. educator and philosopher Dewey (1915, 1938) developed and applied new research methods in education (Spring, 2014). In his early career, Dewey published multiple works involving the theory of inquiry. Humphries (1971) summarized this work by having highlighted the two main parts: "the roles of thought and experience as sources of knowledge and tests of truth; and the nature of significance or intentionality" (p. 485). Dewey's revolutionary approaches to education were detailed in his books *Schools of Tomorrow* (1915) and *Experience and Education* (1938); these included project-based learning, student-led curriculum, and student-centered practices. In his book, *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1916) stipulated learning as a social experience and how the whole child is engaged in meaning-making. Sherman and Webb (2004) discussed Dewey's pragmatist views and how he differentiated between "philosophical" theories and "real" theories (p. 24). He placed importance on educational research as meaningful and supportive of practical application and transformed ways of thinking about teaching and learning, education, and research inquiry.

Education is a complex and constantly evolving field with many stakeholders (NRC, 2002). Due to this complicated nature, context is critical to understanding various phenomena being researched. Merriam (2001) referred to this concept as "meaning in context" and emphasized whatever inquiry type used must be "sensitive to underlying meaning" (p. 1). Research in education has also been closely linked to practice. To ensure education research is rigorous, the design must allow direct, empirical investigation of an important question; account for the context in which the study is carried out; align with a conceptual framework; reflect careful and thorough reasoning; and disclose results to encourage debate in the scientific community (NRC, 2002).

Multiple research designs exist in qualitative research: ethnography, narrative research, case studies, grounded theory, phenomenology, and participatory action research (PAR; Creswell et al., 2007; McMillan, 2012). McMillan (2012) claimed that ethnography requires extensive time and in-depth analysis of a particular setting and culture being studied. Creswell and Poth (2018) noted narrative research includes collecting detailed narratives, or stories, to help understand a problem. Case study research involves an in-depth analysis of a specific case, which may be programs, events, activities, groups, or people, to inform a problem (Creswell et al., 2007; McMillan, 2012). Grounded theory studies generate or discover theory as it relates to an environment (Creswell et al., 2007; McMillan, 2012). A phenomenological study aims to understand a particular phenomenon or lived experience (Creswell et al., 2007). PAR is conducted when a specific problem and environment requires attention to effect change (Creswell et al., 2007). Case study methodology is illustrated in greater detail in the following sections.

## Research Design

Qualitative research includes case study design and methodology. Although frequently used, consensus in this method and its tenets vary. Notable case study methodologists include Yin (2014), Merriam (2001), and Stake (2015). Creswell and Creswell (2018) and McMillan (2012) also provided additional guidance on case study methodology that is referred to throughout the following sections. Each researcher has presented varied, yet equally meaningful, perspectives on case study as a methodology and its procedures (see Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Case Study Methodologist Comparison*

| Methodologist | Yin | Merriam | Stake | McMillan |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Book | Case Study Research, and Applications: Design and Methods (2014, 2018) | Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education (2001) | The Art of Case Study Research (1995) | Educational Research: Fundamentals for the Consumer (2012) |
| Case study methodology definition | "A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the "case") in its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (p. 16) | "An intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon or social unit" (p. 27) | "The study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (p. xi) | "A case study is an in-depth analysis of one or more events, settings, programs, social groups, communities, individuals, or other "bounded systems" in their natural context" (p. 278) |
| "Case" definition | • The classic case focuses on an individual person but can also be some event or entity. | • Refers to the case or unit of study as a "bounded system" | • While it can be a person or program, it can also be a bounded system | "one entity, which is carefully defined and characterized by a time and place" (p. 278) |

| Methodologist | Yin | Merriam | Stake | McMillan |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | • Must derive from the research question. | • "a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries" (p. 27) | that is of interest.<br>• Each case has boundaries and working parts | |
| Requirements | Significant, complete, considers alternative perspectives, displays sufficient evidence and composed in an engaging manner. | • Define bounded system or case<br>• Concentrates on a specific phenomenon<br>• "focuses on holistic description and explanation" (p. 29) | "Good case study is patient, reflective and willing to see another view of the case." (p. 12) | "Type of case study needs to be specified to determine appropriate research questions and methods" (p. 280) |
| Study types | Exploratory<br>Explanatory<br>Descriptive | Ethnographic<br>Historical<br>Psychological<br>Sociological<br>Descriptive<br>Interpretive<br>Evaluative | Intrinsic<br>Instrumental<br>Collective | Historical organizational<br>Observational<br>Life history<br>Situation analysis<br>Multicase (collective)<br>Multisite<br>Instrumental |
| Data sources | Documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observations, physical artifacts | Interviews, observations, documents | Interviews, observations, document review | Semistructured unstructured observations<br>Interviews<br>Artifact analysis<br>Document analysis |

Yazan (2015) examined these different perspectives having stated Yin (2014) created a complete protocol for using case study methodology whereas Merriam's (2001) work focused on case study method as a whole and Stake highlighted the different orientations researchers may take when conducting case study research. Hyett et al. (2014) noted Stake (1995) and Merriam's

approach included a social constructivist paradigm, whereas Yin's approach was rooted in post positivism. Although variations of definitions exist under each methodologist, this variation allows for freedom and flexibility in designing a study that accurately targets the research question (Yazan, 2015). Although differences exist between each version of case study methods, the primary purpose of case study design is to gain a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon and the context and meaning associated with it (Merriam, 2001). Similarly, there is no consensus among researchers that a case study's research must focus on "how" and "why" questions (Stake, 1995).

Case study methodology is used across disciplines and spaces to provide unique insight into the lived experiences of a particular phenomenon. Yin (2018) asserted case study is especially beneficial when "the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (p. 15). In education, particularly in school-based settings, a plethora of factors and stakeholders exist and contribute to create a unique set of circumstances. Employing case study methodology in school-based settings can be advantageous because it can account for the complex contexts that exist. More so, it can be applied to studying special education and SWD. Shrestha and Bhattarai (2022) commented on this by stating, "Case study can be beneficial to unpack the complexity of inclusive education" (p. 73). According to Rouse (2016), participant selection can be determined based on a common trait or demographic such as age, gender, or disability. In the following sections, types of case studies are illuminated based on research by Yin (2014), Merriam (2001), Stake (1995), and McMillan (2012). Case study protocol and design are reviewed, along with types of data collection and avenues for data analysis and reporting. Finally, critiques of case study methodology are presented prior to reporting on school-based case study design.

## Types of Case Study

Case study research types are directly related to how the researcher defines the boundaries of a case (Yin, 2014). These boundaries can be more concrete (e.g., a specific individual, group, organization, program) or less concrete (e.g., a community, specific relationship, partnership). Although the specific measurement of a case varies, it needs to be clearly demarcated. Various researchers have highlighted qualitative research, case study methodology and subsequent case study types, including Yin (2014), Merriam (2001), Stake (1995), and McMillan (2012).

In the fifth edition of his book, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*, Yin (2014) described exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive case study approaches. Exploratory case study research includes gathering data before the research questions are established (Tellis, 1997b). Yin defined explanatory cases as focused on the how or why something occurred or came to be. Yin also illustrated descriptive case studies allow for a phenomenon, or case, to be characterized in its context.

In the book *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*, Merriam (2001) discussed qualitative case studies in four categories: ethnographic, historical, psychological, and sociological. An ethnographic case study focuses on the culture of a particular group or organization. A historical case study involves using primary sources to understand an event or the context of current practice. Psychological case studies focus on the individual as a way to study a particular characteristic. The sociological case study revolves around social constructs and how those affect peoples' environments. Merriam certified the intent of a case study can vary between being descriptive, interpretive, or evaluative.

In the book, *The Art of Case Study Research*, Stake (1995) highlighted three main types of cases: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. Intrinsic studies occur when the case is given, meaning interest is established because a particular case must be dissected to learn more. Instrumental case study refers to when a case study is significant to further understanding a problem. A collective case study is an extension of an instrumental case study in that multiple cases must be chosen and are instrumental to learning about a problem.

McMillan (2012) listed seven case studies in their book *Educational Research: Fundamentals for the Consumer*: historical organizational, observational, life history, situation analysis, multicase or collective, multisite, and instrumental. Historical organizational focuses on a particular organization over a period of time, tracing development. Observational involves examination of the participant as the primary data-gathering method to research a specific entity or aspect of the entity. Life history case studies include a first-person narrative, also referred to as oral history. Situation analysis case studies review a specific event and how it is viewed from different perspectives. Multicase or collective case studies require more than one independent case or entity be studied. A multisite case study refers to more than one location being studied to develop a theory. Finally, an instrumental case study is one that studies a specific case or issue.

I collected 10 empirical school-based case study articles to provide insight into school-based case study design (see Table 4). The type of case study chosen in the articles depended upon the phenomenon being studied and the research question. Many of the articles did not explicitly specify the type of case study used. To determine the type, an additional in-depth investigation was conducted. In the literature collected, there were exploratory, collective, explanatory, descriptive, evaluative, ethnographic, and structured studies. Stake's (1995) case study types (i.e., exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive) were used most commonly and

accounted for 6 of the 10 articles. Also included, however, was ethnographic, collective, evaluative, and structured.

**Table 4**

*Summary of School-Based Case Studies*

| Title | Author(s) | Date | Case study type | Research question / purpose statement |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| The Complexity of Practicum Assessment in Teacher Education: An Examination of Four New Zealand Case Studies | Aspden, K. | 2017 | Exploratory | Q1: How is the assessment of practicum enacted and experienced by key stakeholders in early childhood initial teacher education?<br>Purpose Statement: The aim of this study was to critically analyze how a representative sample of New Zealand's initial teacher education institutions assess the early childhood practicum, to illuminate and make current practicum assessment policy and practice more transparent. |
| Becoming Trauma-Informed: A Case Study of Early Educator Professional Development and Organizational Change | Douglass, A., Chickerella, R. & Maroney, M. | 2021 | Structured / inductive thematic approach | Q1: How did BSC participants change as a result of their involvement in BSC?<br>Q2: How did participants make changes in ECE programs to improve trauma-informed practices as a result of the BSC?<br>Q3: How did organizational practices and systems change as a result of agency involvement in the BSC? |
| The First Year as Teachers Assigned to Elementary and Middle-School Special Education Classrooms | Gee, K. & Gonsier-Gerdin, J. | 2018 | Collective | Purpose Statement: To understand and represent the experiences of the 10 teachers in the current study, the issue of concern was the experience of first-year teachers who were assigned |

| Title | Author(s) | Date | Case study type | Research question / purpose statement |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | to special education classrooms. |
| Undocumented and College-Bound: A Case Study of the Supports and Barriers High School Students Encounter in Accessing Higher Education | Murillo, M. | 2021 | Explanatory | Q1: How are undocumented students supported by educators at an urban, California high school during the college planning and application process? Q2: What challenges do educators and students encounter? |
| Influences on Teachers' Decisions About Literacy for Secondary Students with Severe Disabilities | Ruppar, A., Gaffney, J., & Dymond, S. | 2015 | Explanatory | Purpose Statement: The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how special education teachers' beliefs and contexts influence their literacy decisions for secondary students with severe disabilities. |
| Augmentative and Alternative Communication in an Elementary School Setting: A Case Study | Walker, V. & Chung, Y. | 2021 | Descriptive | Q1: How are AAC systems implemented within an elementary school setting among students with severe disabilities who have complex communication needs that necessitate the use of AAC? |
| Voices from Those Not Heard: A Case Study on the Inclusion Experience of Adolescent Girls with Emotional–Behavioral Disabilities | Whitlow, D., Cooper, R., & Couvillon, M. | 2019 | Descriptive | Purpose Statement: The purpose of this study was to provide additional insight into the inclusion experiences of adolescent girls with EBD. |
| Training Teachers in Inclusive Classrooms to Collect Data on Individualized Child Goals | Shepley, C., Grisham-Brown, J., Lane, J., & Ault, M. | 2022 | Evaluative | Q1: Is a training package consisting of commonly recommended training practices functionally related to teachers' generalized implementation of TDBO procedures? Q2: What is the average |

| Title | Author(s) | Date | Case study type | Research question / purpose statement |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | amount of time spent engaged in different training activities by the trainer? |
| An Ethnographic Case Study: Exploring Inclusive Teachers' Experiences as Collaborative Leaders | Szyarto, C. | 2009 | Ethnographic collective | Q1: Based on their personal accounts of collaborative leadership experiences, how do elementary general education teachers describe their collaborative practices in inclusive classrooms where paraprofessionals are assigned to aid teaching and learning? |

In the school-based case study literature collected, six explicitly listed the study's research question(s) and four only included a purpose statement. It was difficult in the four articles to determine the exact phenomenon being studied as it was not clearly noted and was embedded in different parts of the article. Of the six studies listing research questions, five were "how" questions and one started with "is." The research questions were dependent upon the unit of analysis and type of study being conducted. For example, if a case study was descriptive in nature, the research question asked how something was implemented so the results would describe the intervention or strategy. This was evident in Walker and Chung's (2022) descriptive case study regarding the implementation of communication systems.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) asserted purpose statements should revolve around the phenomenon in question and should specify the participants and site of research. Each purpose statement collected clearly specified the phenomenon and the participants although the research site was often lacking. For example, Gee and Gonsier-Gerdin's (2018) collective case study's statement clearly listed special education classrooms as the site whereas Sabruddin et al. (2020) merely indicated teaching students with autism and the location, the classroom, was only

implied. The purpose statements began with phrases such as “determine,” “examine,” “understand,” “represent,” and “provide additional insight.”

## Case Study Protocol

Establishing a protocol in any research project is an integral step (Health Research Authority, 2018). Creating a comprehensive description of the project allows for all researchers to have a guide of the methods being used and for governing bodies to be able to understand the study. Although they may differ, they should be as detailed as possible and include items such as rationale, the theoretical framework, research questions, design/methods, sample and recruitment details, and ethical compliance information (Health Research Authority, 2018). Yin (2014) clarified case study protocols include an overview of the project, data collection procedures, research questions, and a guide for the report.

## Case Study Research Design

Within case study protocol is the research design. In their work, Yin (2014), Merriam (2001), Stake (1995), and McMillan (2012) suggested a case study design must identify the research question, define the type of case study being used, and clearly explain the unit of analysis or the “case” being inspected, and the phenomenon and context in question. The most crucial step in designing a case study is determining the unit of analysis or case (Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) noted this includes holistic and embedded single or multicase designs. Embedded designs occur when the subunits are within the original case. The decision between single or multicase design depends on the research question and study area. A single case is most applicable when evaluating a specific theory, circumstance, or case. Multicase studies are appropriate when replication between the cases can occur. Once the specific unit of analysis or “case” and its

boundaries have been notated, identification of the population and selection of participants can begin.

The case study design types included in the studies referenced in Table 3-2 consisted of both single, embedded single, multicase, and embedded multicase. The design type was a direct result of the unit of analysis which, in these school-based studies, included schools, programs, teachers, and students. For example, Aspden's (2017) exploratory study was an embedded multicase with each case being a school, with four schools total. Each case consisted of a triad of a student teacher, associate teacher, and teacher educator. Another article written by Gee and Gonsier-Gerdin (2018) included a multicase—each case was a special education teacher. This design type appeared to be the most applicable for the current study; however, the design type is entirely dependent upon the participants selected. Taking the purpose and merit of these case study designs into account, this dissertation used an explanatory multicase study design with the unit of analysis being one educator. Further details regarding the case study protocol are investigated in the next section.

**Population and Sample Selection**

As stipulated at the beginning of the chapter, each case unit was an educator responsible for students with ESN who were not included for most of their school day. Students in this category spend a majority (i.e., 50% or more of their day) in segregated settings with limited to no access to their general education (GE) peers. The participants of this study were teachers of students with ESN.

Participants were confirmed through purposeful and convenience sampling. As described by Patton (2002), purposeful sampling consists of "select[ing] information-rich cases" chosen "strategically and purposefully" (p. 243). Participants were selected because they were presently

instructing students with ESN in K–12 education. Convenience sampling was used because the researcher had heightened access to participants, which made data collection easier (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To determine the ideal number of participants, the researcher analyzed the sample size of the school-based case study literature, which ranged between 1–14 students, 1–4 schools, and 1–13 educators. However, the multicase studies involving educators as participants had a higher sample size, including 4, 5, 10, and 13. Gee and Gonsier-Gerdin's (2018) study regarding 1st-year special education teachers' experiences had a sample size of 10 moderate/severe teachers, which yielded sufficient data. Although the original goal of the current study was to secure 10 participants, nine participants were successfully included. Due to the saturation of data collection, the researcher determined nine participants were sufficient. Participant demographics, as well as student, school, and district demographics are explored in the following sections.

**Participant Demographics**

A total of nine participants were confirmed for this study and had to meet the following inclusion criteria: (a) must hold a valid ESN (previously named moderate/severe) education specialist credential, (b) must have served in their position for at least 2 years, and (c) must teach in California. According to the 2018–2019 public school teacher demographic data from the California Department of Education (2023b), 73% of all teachers were female (with the remainder male), 20% were Hispanic or Latino, and 61% were White. Of the nine participants, all were female, 11% of participants were Hispanic, and 89% were White.

All participants received an undergraduate degree, and eight of the nine participants received a graduate degree in addition to their teaching credentials. Their years of teaching ranged from 3–31 years, with a total of 83 years of teaching. All participants had preteaching

experiences, including being a substitute teacher, special education instructional aide, or previous teaching experience. The participant's background information can be seen in Table 5; pseudonyms were used to protect participation information and ensure anonymity.

**Table 5**

*Participant Background Information*

| Participant | Undergraduate education | Graduate education | Credential* | Years teaching | Preteaching experiences | Race/ ethnicity |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lucy | BA psychology | MA education | Mod/severe | 7 years | Psychology internship, culinary school, special education aide | White |
| Jackie | BA psychology<br>Minor child development | MA special education | Mild/mod<br>mod/severe | 11 years | Taught at development center | White |
| Stephanie | BA child development | N/A | Mod/severe | 8 years | Special education aide | White |
| Brooke | BA Child Development | MA education | Mod/severe<br>Adapted PE | 8 years | Special education aide<br>PWD support person | White |
| Gracie | Associates<br>BA sociology | MA special education | Mod/severe | 3 years | Special education aide | White |
| Kimberly | BA art<br>Minor political science | MA in Autism | Severely handicapped | 31 years | General education teacher | White |
| Beth | BA early childhood studies | MA special education | Mod/severe | 3 years | Substitute teaching | White |
| Isabelle | BA Liberal Studies | MA education | Mod/severe | 7 years | Special education aide | Hispanic |
| Madeline | BA English emphasis in | MA in applied behavior analysis | Mod/severe | 5 years | Substitute teaching | White |

| Participant | Undergraduate education | Graduate education | Credential* | Years teaching | Preteaching experiences | Race/ ethnicity |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | special education | | | | | |

*Note.* The listed name of the credential is what the name was upon earning. Currently, these credentials fall under the ESN Credential.

**Student and Class Demographics**

All classes were specified as self-contained or special day classes, with student numbers ranging from 5–17 students and an approximate average of 11 students. Four of the nine classes were stipulated as autism specific. There was an even distribution of class levels: one transitional kindergarten class (TK), one lower elementary (Grades K–2), one upper elementary (Grades 4–6), three middle school classes (Grades 6–8), and two high schools (Grades 9–12). All classes participated in the California Alternate Assessments (CAA) if eligible. Those who were not eligible due to grade level did participate in the Alternate English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC). Students in participants' classes had primary eligibilities of autism and intellectual disability with secondary eligibilities of speech language impairment, other health impairment, and multiple disabilities. This information is presented in table format in Table 6.

**Table 6**

*Student and Class Demographics*

| Participant | Class title | Grades | Total # of students | Eligibilities | LRE % | State testing |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lucy | SDC - Autism Specific | Middle school (7–8) | 5 | AUT, SLI | 50/50 *on paper* | All CAA |

| Participant | Class title | Grades | Total # of students | Eligibilities | LRE % | State testing |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jackie | SDC - Autism Specific | Transitional kindergarten | 11 | AUT, SLI, OHI | 77/23 | N/A<br>Alt. ELPAC |
| Stephanie | SDC | Middle school (6–8) | 11 | ID, AUT, OHI | 85/15 | All CAA |
| Brooke | SDC | High school (9–12) | 12 | ID/AUT | 70/30<br>80/20 | All CAA |
| Gracie | SDC - Autism specific | Lower elementary (K–2) | 9 | AUT/ID, OHI/SLI | 80/20 | N/A<br>Alt. ELPAC |
| Kimberly | SDC | High school (9–12) | 12 | AUT/SLI, ID/AUT/MD | 80/20 | All CAA |
| Beth | SDC - Autism specific | Upper elementary (4–6) | 11 | AUT, ID, SLI | 77/23 | All CAA |
| *Isabelle* | SDC | High school (9–12) | 10 | ID, OHI, AUT | 74/26 | All CAA |
| Madeline | SDC | Middle School (6-8) | 17 | AUT/OHI/ ID | 50/50<br>80/20 | All CAA |

*Note.* The first number identified in the least restrictive environment (LRE) percentage is the percent of time students spend outside of GE. The second number identified is the percentage of time students spend inside GE. The eligibilities include autism (AUT), speech language impairment (SLI), other health impairment (OHI), intellectual disability (ID), and multiple disabilities (MD).

Also included in the demographics table is the percentage of time students spend in and out of GE per their IEP. Participants were asked what percentage of time their students spend outside of GE and given the following options: over 80%, 60%–79%, 40%–59%, and below 40%. There were multiple percentages represented in one class, producing a total of 11 different percentages. Five percentages fell in the above 80% range, four fell in the 60%–79%, and two fell in the 40%–59% range. The two in the 40%–59% range were either not the entire class (another more restrictive percentage was present), or it was only on paper and not occurring

regularly. The percentages participants confirmed were commensurate with the information presented in the literature review.

**Other Class Characteristics**

Behavior management was pinpointed as the most significant need in the participants' classes; seven out of the nine acknowledged behavior. Two participants, Kimberly and Stephanie, had students with mobility needs and used supports such as wheelchairs, gait trainers, standers, and walkers. Other participants claimed needs such as bathroom and feeding support as well as alternate methods of communication. Participants shared their students received a wide variety of related services, including but not limited to speech, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and vision). This information was also commensurate with the definition of ESN.

Additional adult support varied significantly between the participants' classes and was very nuanced. For example, although Kimberly's class had six classroom aides, they were frequently staffed with substitutes. Six of the nine participants had between two and four aides daily. Most classrooms had morning and afternoon shifts that typically did not overlap in the middle of the day. Furthermore, the aides were comprised of district personnel and nonpublic agencies staff. The aides also were often differentiated as general classroom aides or one-on-one paraprofessional. The nuance and complexity of the aide coverage is further explored later in the chapter.

Special designations in the participant's classes included English language learners (ELL), Title 1, McKinney Vento (homeless populations), and foster youth. The participants confirmed these designations. Four participants, Lucy, Kimberly, Beth, and Madeline explained that they had no ELLs in their classrooms. Jackie and Isabelle had a large population of ELLs in their classrooms. Five of the nine classrooms had demographics that matched the school. Lucy,

Isabelle, Stephanie, and Beth's class socioeconomic and race demographics did not match their school. The class socioeconomic and race demographics can be seen in Table 7. In the next section, the school demographics are illuminated.

**Table 7**
*Class Demographics*

| Participant | Class special designations | Do class demographics match school demographics? |
|---|---|---|
| Lucy | No ELL | No, the school had more White students not represented in the class. |
| Jackie | 7/11 students ELL McKinney Vento | Yes |
| Stephanie | Title 1 | No, the school was only 20% Hispanic, but a majority of the class was Hispanic/ |
| Brooke | 1 McKinney Vento 3 foster youth | Yes |
| Gracie | 2 McKinney Vento | Yes |
| Kimberly | No ELL | Yes |
| Beth | No ELL | No, school was primarily Korean, class was Hispanic. |
| Isabelle | 50% ELL | No, class had higher percentage of English Learners. |
| Madeline | No ELL | Yes |

**School Demographics**

This section includes the following demographics: grade, socioeconomic status, race, program information, and the various supports on campus, including related services and community support. As seen in Table 8, there were three elementary schools, three middle schools, and three high schools. This even distribution provided valuable insight into the unique characteristics of the different levels of schooling. The school demographics included socioeconomic status and race demographics. The school demographics were gathered from Great Schools which is a nonprofit that provides public information of specific schools. Low-

income percentages represented the amount of the population that accessed free and reduced priced lunch (FRDL). These percentages were organized into the following ranges: low (< 60%), middle (31%–59%), and high (> 30%). Of the nine participants, the socioeconomic status of their classes was as follows: four low socioeconomic status, one medium socioeconomic status, and four high socioeconomic status.

**Table 8**

*School Demographics*

| Participant | Primary races | Socioeconomic status level | Special designations |
|---|---|---|---|
| Lucy | 45% White<br>37% Asian<br>13% Other<br>4% Hispanic | High (3% FRDL) | 3% English learners |
| Jackie | 70% Hispanic<br>16% Asian<br>10% White<br>4% Other | Low (69% FRDL) | Title 1<br>38% English learners |
| Stephanie | 36% Asian<br>32% White<br>20% Hispanic<br>11% Other | High (19% FRDL) | Title 1<br>7% English learners |
| Brooke | 70% Hispanic<br>25% Vietnamese<br>5% Other | Low (86.3% FRDL) | 25.2% English learners |
| Gracie | 86% Hispanic<br>6% Asian/Pacific Islander<br>3% Black<br>3% White | Low (70% FRDL) | Title 1<br>2 McKinney Vento students<br>40% English learners |
| Kimberly | 46% White<br>27% Hispanic<br>17% Asian<br>11%. Other | High (16% FRDL) | 1% English learners |
| Beth | 65% Asian<br>20% Hispanic<br>7% White<br>7% Other | Middle (31% FRDL) | 24% English learners |
| Isabelle | 95% Hispanic<br>2% White<br>1% Asian | Low (92% FRDL) | Title 1<br>26% English learners |

| Participant | Primary races | Socioeconomic status level | Special designations |
|---|---|---|---|
| Madeline | 1% Black<br>51% White<br>25% Hispanic<br>16% Asian<br>6% Other | High (25% FRDL) | 5% English learners |

Participants Jackie, Stephanie, Gracie, and Isabelle confirmed their schools as Title 1. California Department of Education refers to Title 1 as a means to help "disadvantaged students meet state academic content and performance standards" (California Department of Education, 2023b, para. 1). Schools of this designation typically receive additional funding and support from the state to ensure "fair, equal, and significant opportunity" (California Department of Education, 2023b, para. 2). Four schools were predominantly Hispanic (i.e., Isabelle, Gracie, Brooke, Jackie), two Asian (i.e., Beth, Stephanie), and three White (i.e., Madeline, Kimberly, Lucy).

Various programs were offered at the participants' sites, including but not limited to mild/moderate, resource specialist, behavior programs, autism clinics, or specific classes and life skills. Also available on the school sites were a wide variety of related services. These services included those that resided at the school site, such as school psychologists, counselors, speech-language pathologists, and other services that traveled to the site as needed, including adapted physical education, occupational therapists, behaviorists, and others. There were also supports such as free breakfast and lunch for students and families, onsite interpreters, and student transportation.

**District Demographics**

The information participants provided regarding district demographics were centered primarily on program and placement discrepancies, which are highlighted in the results portion. Of the nine participants, eight districts were represented; three of which had segregated sites, and

all districts had restrictive settings for ESN students. Although race demographics were readily available per school, the breakdown of race by district was not accessible. However, I used the California School Dashboard to determine each district's socioeconomic status and ELL numbers. The California School Dashboard described a socioeconomically disadvantaged percentage that was defined as "students who are eligible for free or reduced priced meals or have parents/guardians who did not receive a high school diploma" (California Department of Education, 2023a, para. 3). I used the same metrics of the following socioeconomic status ranges: low (< 60%), middle (31%–59%), and high (> 30%). Four districts were recognized as having low socioeconomic status, two as middle, and three as high. This information and the percentage of ELL designations are presented in Table 9. Now that the participant, class, school, and district demographics have been thoroughly reviewed, the results will be explored.

**Table 9**

*District Socioeconomic Demographics*

| Participant | Socioeconomic status level | Special designations |
|---|---|---|
| Lucy | High (3% FRDL) | 1.7% ELL |
| Jackie | Middle (45.3% FRDL) | 14.2% ELL |
| Stephanie | High (27.8% FRDL) | 13.3% ELL |
| Brooke | Low (78.9% FRDL) | 29.8% ELL |
| Gracie | Low (87.6% FRDL) | 45.2% ELL |
| Kimberly | High (15.7% FRDL) | 2.3% ELL |
| Beth | Middle (39.6% FRDL) | 23% ELL |
| Isabelle | Low (92.5% FRD) | 27.9% ELL |
| Madeline | Middle (45.3% FRDL) | 14.2% ELL |

## Sources of Data

Data collection needs to be comprehensive and reliable to properly examine research questions. The types of data used in case study research include documentation (e.g., fliers, syllabi, lesson plans, email correspondence), archival records, interviews, observations, and physical artifacts (Yin, 2014). To maximize the use of evidence when collecting data, Yin (2014) referred to four leading principles. First, it is recommended to use multiple sources of evidence so that triangulation, or convergence of the evidence, can occur. Second, researchers must create a case study database to organize and document the collected data. This database can consist of notes, documents, materials, and narrative compilations. The third principle is to maintain a chain of evidence to construct validity. The evidence and resulting conclusions must consistently be referred to the initial research question. The final principle Yin detailed is to exercise care when using data from social media sources. Confirming items' validity, source, and permissions on social media can be extremely difficult. In the following sections, the primary data sources in case study research are explained, followed by details of the data collection and management for this study.

### Interviews

Within the realm of qualitative research, interviews are often used to collect various data. Within case study, open-ended or unstructured, focused, and structured are all types of interviews that can be used (Tellis, 1997a). These can be used to highlight participants' experiences and can provide insightful and meaningful views. However, bias due to inaccurate question construction, dynamics between the interviewee and interviewer, and inaccuracies due to poor recall are realities of this method of data collection (Yin, 2018). Stake (1995) recommended pilot interviews and memoing to mitigate these concerns. Interviews, including

semistructured individual and small groups, were the primary source of data for this dissertation. Interview questions are listed in Appendix A. Additional information regarding these interviews is listed in this chapter's data collection and management section.

**Documentation and Artifacts**

Documents can include emails, letters, administrative documents, articles, notes, or anything pertinent to the inquiry. Merriam (2001) grouped documentation into three categories: public records, personal documents, and physical material. For the purposes of triangulation of evidence, which is discussed in detail later, the documents included should confirm findings from other data sources (Tellis, 1997a). If a discrepancy exists between the document and the evidence, further insight into the problem must be explored (Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) stated documents could be stable, unobtrusive, specific, and broad. It can also include issues such as retrievability, biased selectivity, reporting bias, and difficulty accessing.

In addition to documentation, physical artifacts can include a tool, instrument, or physical evidence collected during the study (Merriam, 2001). Often used in anthropological research, physical artifacts can provide a unique insight into cultural features and their operation (Yin, 2018). If relevant, artifacts can provide invaluable data to a project. For this dissertation, I collected documentation to support and corroborate the interviews by providing context and the practical implementation of the practices communicated in the interviews. Although participants provided documentation of specific artifacts were provided by participants, the actual artifacts were not included.

**Observations and Archival Records**

There are two distinct types of observations: direct and participant. Direct observations occur during a field visit during the project (Yin, 2018). The direct observations' formality can

vary greatly depending on the study. Participant observation is when the researcher is not passively observing but actively participating in the scene, event, or community being studied (Tellis, 1997a). Yin (2018) specified observations allow for immediate and contextual documentation but can also be time consuming and costly, and behavior may vary due to the knowledge of being observed. According to Stake (1995), observations should create an "incontestable description" (p. 62) that can be explored later. Observations, both direct and participant, were not used as data sources in this dissertation. Although observations would lend great insight into this research problem, gaining approval to conduct observations in a school setting was beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Included in archival records are public service records, organizational or survey data, and other records. The records' legitimacy, accuracy, and context must be verified prior to use in the study and are often used with other sources of data (Yin, 2014). Although they may have similar strengths and weaknesses to documents, difficulty accessing them due to confidentiality is the biggest hindrance. Archival records were used in this dissertation to support the triangulation of data and the inclusion of related statistics.

These sources of data, including interviews, documentation, artifacts, observations, and archival records, are all critical aspects of case study research design. Interviews were the primary data source for this dissertation, with documentation and archival records as supporting sources. For these data to inform the research questions appropriately, the validity and reliability of the study must be elaborated upon.

## Validity

A goal of qualitative research is to produce "valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner" (Merriam, 2001, p. 198). For the results of qualitative research to be valid, the design

must be credible. McMillan (2012) described credibility in qualitative research as "the extent to which the data, data analysis, and conclusions are accurate and trustworthy" (p. 302). Additionally, it requires the inferences and interpretations made be valid. Validity is "the extent to which inferences are appropriate and meaningful" (McMillan, 2012, p. 131).

There are two types of validity: internal and external. Internal validity refers to the ethical obligation researchers have to ensure correct representation and understanding of the phenomenon in question (Stake, 1995). It is essential that the correct type of inference, and subsequently the research design, be used when investigating a particular phenomenon (Yin, 2018). External validity refers to the ability of the results to be transferable to the population in question; Creswell and Poth (2018) posited the findings must be strong and convincing. The main avenues for determining the accuracy and trustworthiness of a study and its results include multiple sources of data, triangulation, and member checking.

Internal validity was ensured through an expert panel review of interview questions and study protocol. Before starting the study, the study protocol was detailed in the dissertation proposal and reviewed thoroughly by my dissertation committee. The interview questions were then aligned with the research questions and theoretical framework and were assessed by the committee, an expert panel of study. I received feedback and made changes as needed.

External validity was ensured through member checking and triangulation of multiple data sources. Chapter 3 investigated the multiple data sources in case study methodology. Interviews, documents, and archival records were all data sources used in this study. When the data analysis was conducted, the documents and archival records were included with related information in the results. This validity measure allowed for triangulation of the multiple data sources to be completed. The final validity method was member checking, where the results were

given to all participants, and any feedback was considered when representing the results. Specific questions were provided to participants to guide their review of the results and are detailed in the member checking portion of this methodology chapter.

A detailed study protocol was developed to ensure reliability. The information on data collection and analysis results included in this chapter allows for the repeatability of the study if future researchers were to recreate this study. The data collection and analysis summaries and the validity and reliability methods illustrated previously create a foundation for the data results. In the following sections, these various avenues of validity and reliability are explained in greater detail.

**Multiple Sources of Data**

To ensure validity, multiple data sources must be collected when conducting a case study. Yin (2018) warned against collecting only one type of evidence (e.g., only doing participant observations but not including documents or only relying on archives with little to no interviews). This imbalance of data sources opens the analysis of those data to questioning. It is also highlighted that multiple data sources are critical in case study design, as opposed to other methods, because a phenomenon cannot be understood on only one level. The phenomena in question can be viewed through multiple layers and contexts using multiple data sources, including interviews, documents, and archival records.

**Triangulation**

Essential to quality qualitative research is the concept of triangulation, or convergence, of findings and data (McMillan, 2012). Merriam (2001) described triangulation as "using multiple investigators, multiple sources of data, or multiple methods to confirm the emergence of findings" (p. 204). Similarly, Stake (1995) described triangulation as using additional

observations to rationalize interpretations. Yin (2018), who referred to triangulation as "converging lines of inquiry" (p. 127), affirmed using multiple sources of data as a core principle of data collection. This frequently used method supports the call-in case study research for evaluating the phenomena in question through different perspectives (Baxter & Jack, 2015). For the purposes of this dissertation, the transcripts from interviews and focus groups were used in correlation with related documentation such as fliers, syllabi, lesson plans, and email correspondence. The results of these comparisons are elaborated on in Chapter 4.

**Member Checking**

Case study qualitative research involves the inquiry into a phenomenon and the meaning people place on it. For the research to be truly ethical, it must include the participants, or "actors," according to Stake (1995). These actors can provide observations, suggestions, and interpretations to aid in the understanding of the results (McMillan, 2012). Merriam (2001) recommended doing this throughout the study and requires the people involved to be active in determining results. Member checking can also include conducting additional interviews to provide clarity and allow for their insights to be heard (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

In this study, member checking was completed by asking participants to review the study's findings. This was completed by the findings being shared individually with each participant. The following questions, stipulated in McKim's 2023 article, were offered to the participants to encourage critical thinking about the findings. These questions were as follows:

- After reading through the findings, what are your general thoughts?
- How accurately do you feel the findings captured your thoughts/experiences?
- What could be added to the findings to capture your experiences better?
- If there is anything you would like removed, what would that be and why?

Although minor feedback was received regarding demographic facts, the overall findings were corroborated.

### Reliability

According to Yin (2018), a study should be designed to allow for repeatability in data collection if the same procedures are followed; this refers to the study's reliability. Although it is impossible to eradicate all errors from a study, efforts in reliability allow for the error to be minimized (McMillan, 2012). Multiple steps can be taken to ensure reliability through intercoder agreement (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, due to the nature of this study, only one researcher analyzed the data. Another way to establish reliability is to effectively document all steps of the study protocol (Yin, 2018). This reliability could be achieved by keeping a detailed case study protocol and database.

## Data Collection and Management

Data collection techniques in school-based case study research were reviewed. Identified data collection techniques included the following: (a) interviews (i.e., single and multiple; informational, semistructured, and structured), (b) observations (i.e., individual and ongoing; videoed and direct), (c) documents (i.e., pictures, individualized education plan (IEP) documents, program, or intervention materials), and (d) focus groups. These data types were common in the literature reviewed in preparing for this study, and all used some form of interviews, observations, and documents. These data sources were repeatedly used in a structured, planned manner. For example, Ruppar et al.'s (2015) study illustrated the following when reviewing the data collection techniques: initial interview, IEP review, multiple rounds of observation, follow-up questionnaire, and curriculum materials collected, and lastly, the final interview with a stimulated recall of lesson videos. This example demonstrates how different data types and data

collection methods can be used to gain a unique understanding of the phenomenon in question. This dissertation used individual and focus group semistructured interviews and the process followed is outlined in the following two sections.

**Informed Consent**

For this dissertation, all participants provided informed consent prior to the start of the study. This consent was obtained by presenting the potential participant with the consent forms required by the institutional review board committee of Chapman University. These consent forms were explained to the potential participant in their primary language. The potential participant claimed a preference for signing via hard copy or digitally through DropboxSign. All participants opted to sign digitally through DropboxSign. A copy of the informed consent document is included in the Appendix B.

**Interview Protocol**

Once informed consent was received, the researcher scheduled the initial interviews with the participants. When scheduling, participants were given a choice for the interviews to be conducted virtually or in person. This was offered to participants to ensure they were comfortable and had a direct voice in the research-making process. Of the 26 interviews conducted in total, 22 were conducted virtually on the Zoom platform and four were conducted in person.

Participation requirements included two 1-hour individual interviews and a single 1-hour focus group interview, totaling 3 hours. The time between Interview A, Interview B, and the focus group were used to reflect on the previous interview and identify areas needing additional insight or further exploration. These areas aided in the saturation of the questions constructed for the next interview. The focus group interviews focused on answering Research Question 3—the

challenges and barriers faced in facilitating inclusion opportunities for students with ESN. Both sets of interviews were semistructured, which supported the natural flow of conversation with general guideposts.

Although both sets of interviews were expected to be a minimum of 45 minutes to 1 hour, additional time was reserved to allow participants to continue a thought, process any emotions that may arise, and discuss the topic freely. For each scheduled individual interview, 1 and a half hours were set aside in the event additional time is needed. For the focus group interviews, 2 hours were reserved. If the interview became emotional or if additional time was needed, the researcher offered to either conclude, continue, or schedule a follow-up meeting to address the concern appropriately. This occurred in five first interviews; thus, a second initial interview was conducted with these participants to address the remaining questions.

Furthermore, all data sources related to participants and their students were referred to using a pseudonym. I kept a single key document was in my personal hard copy files with the pseudonym used to mask the real identity of participants and their students. Ensuring confidentiality was honored and not violated in any way was essential to the safety of all involved, either directly or indirectly.

Interview protocol guides for each round of interviews that allowed for notes to be taken next to the research questions. This protocol was used for precoding and is elaborated on later in the data analysis process. In addition to the direct interviews, participants were asked to provide additional documents (e.g., fliers, syllabi, lesson plans, email correspondence) necessary to illuminate experiences and practices ascertained during the interviews. Each participant was provided with a Google Drive folder to upload related documents. This folder was only accessible to the researcher and the participant. Participants submitted documents via email, or a

password protected and secure folder. I then analyzed these documents for relevance, coded them based on file type and purpose, and anonymized them. These documents were then placed with the corresponding results.

Ultimately, the participants partook in three rounds of interviews, two individual and one focus group. This research study consisted of a total of 26 interviews. Participants chose to complete the interviews in person or virtually via Zoom. Two interviews were conducted in person: one individual interview at the participant's home and one focus group interview at the researcher's family home. Interview A consisted of 14 sessions; five participants needed an additional interview session to complete the questions. Interview B consisted of nine total interviews, and the focus groups totaled three interviews. The focus group interviews were completed in groups of three. One participant, Stephanie, was ill during the focus group interview and could not participate. Table 10 indicates the total number of interviews, hours, and pages of transcripts for each round of interviews. There were 26 interviews, 20.98 hours, and 534 pages of transcripts.

**Table 10**
*Data Summary*

| Component | Total number of interviews | Total number of minutes / hours | Total pages of transcripts |
|---|---|---|---|
| Interview A (Part 1) | 9 | 524 mins / 8.74 hours | 228 |
| Interview A (Part 2) | 5 | 184 mins / 3.07 hours | 71 |
| Interview B | 9 | 398 mins / 6.64 hours | 165 |
| Focus groups | 3 | 153 mins / 2.55 hours | 70 |
| TOTAL | 26 | 1,259 minutes / 20.98 hours | 534 |

## Data Analysis Procedures

Data came in the form of audio recordings from the interviews and associated documentation. These recordings were transcribed through Rev.com, a transcription service, and were reviewed multiple times by the researcher to ensure accuracy. All raw documentation were cataloged independently and in correlation with the associated parts of the interview.

The first step of the data analysis process was precoding. This step is considered as a form of notetaking during the data collection process where the researcher can indicate important potential findings (Boyatzis, 1998; Layder, 1998; Saldaña, 2016). Once all transcripts were reviewed, the data were placed into a Google Sheets file and the data were divided up into incidents. These raw data translated into 2,138 lines, segregated by incidents, of data once filler responses (e.g., "yeah") were removed. Once the data were compiled in a Google Sheets file, the following coding headers were created: precode, initial code, focus code, subcategory, category, and theme (see Appendix C for an example). Layder (1998) and Boyatzis (1998) defined precoding as the notation of significant instances and thoughts prior to or during the data collection process; Saldaña (2016) called it "those codable moments worthy of attention" (p. 21). The notes taken during the interviews were transferred to the first column next to the related instance.

Following this step, the initial code was completed with in vivo coding, which means "literal" or "verbatim" coding (Saldaña, 2016, p. 105). Focused coding was completed, where frequently used initial codes are categorized and influence the code created. Yin (2018) referred to this as "working your data from the 'ground up" (p. 169). Like grounded theory, focused coding refers to combining the most frequently occurring initial codes and organizing them into larger ones (Charmaz, 2014).

The final stage was pattern coding, which moves the focus codes into larger categories and themes that represent important meaning (Saldaña, 2016). I used subcategories, categories, and themes. An example of this breakdown can be viewed through Table 11. The documents provided by the participants were coded in a similar manner. First, they were coded by the type of document (e.g., lesson, flier, communication). Then, based on their content they were organized into the corresponding theme. For example, a modified lesson was coded as an example of the educational practice differentiation and modification.

**Table 11**

*Theme, Subcategory, and Category Data Organization*

| Category number | Category title | Subcategory |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Participant personal experience | Experiences supporting pursuing special education |
| | | Family valuing education |
| | | Specific students/experiences |
| 2 | Participant previous experience | Exposure to disability growing up |
| | | Experience in teacher ed program |
| 3 | Participant Personal views | Views on disability/PWD |
| | | Personal experience having disability |
| | | Family's views on PWD |
| 4 | Participant present experience | Current position experience |
| | | Present Experience with Disability |

By nature, case study research analysis is inductive and requires transforming raw data into overarching themes that inform the understanding of a phenomenon (Bhattacharya, 2017). Data analysis should include "examining, categorizing, tabulating, or otherwise recombining the evidence to address the initial propositions of the study" (Ebneyamini & Sadeghi Moghadam, 2018, p. 6). In the book, *The Art of Case Study Research*, Stake (1995) reasoned that there is no clear beginning when data analysis starts. Qualitative researchers such as Creswell and Creswell

(2018) noted a "data analysis spiral" (p. 185) where the data collection, analysis, and reporting are a part of a cyclical process throughout the study to ensure congruence. This spiral is referred to as the constant comparative method, made popular by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Yin (2018) advocated for five different analytic techniques: pattern matching, explanation building, time-series analysis, logic models, and cross-case synthesis. Whereas Stake (1995) focused on categorical aggregation, direct interpretation, and pattern matching. Merriam (2001) highlighted ethnographic analysis, narrative analysis, phenomenological analysis, and the constant comparative method. These analytic techniques have been synthesized into three main categories: pattern matching, category construction, and cross-case synthesis. The following sections review each analysis type and how they were used in this dissertation.

**Pattern Matching and Category Construction**

Within case study analysis, pattern matching is the most desirable data analysis technique (Yin, 2018). Stake (1995) began explaining this technique by emphasizing the repeated larger themes. This data interpretation method involves comparing a pattern ascertained through repetitive data analysis with predicted or initial patterns (McMillan, 2012; Yin, 2018). Although the patterns can sometimes be known prior to data collection, they also can, as Stake (1995) stated, "emerge unexpectedly" (p. 78).

Another common analysis technique in case study research is category construction. Referred to as categorical aggregation by Stake (1995), this type of data analysis is similar to pattern matching in that the more instances that can be aggregated produce a category or class (Merriam, 2001; Stake, 1995). A category was defined by McMillan (2012) as an "idea that represents coded data" (p. 299). The process of category construction should be systematic and revolve around the study's purpose, eventually producing overarching themes (Merriam, 2001).

Pattern matching and category construction are similar in allowing the data analysis to present themes. By allowing the data to speak for themselves, there is less of a threat to the study's validity. These two data analysis techniques were exceptionally qualified to answer the research questions in this study because they allowed for the perspectives of those being interviewed to be presented and the nuance of those perspectives to be highlighted. The final stage of coding, pattern coding, represented both of these data analysis techniques.

### Cross-Case Synthesis

The final analysis technique is a cross-case synthesis that requires analyzing the different cases represented in the data, allowing for greater generalization (Merriam, 2001). According to Stake (1995), the primary purpose of case study research is to understand a particular case in question and how it can inform knowledge of other similar cases. This analytic technique can be beneficial in finding consensus across a group of people or programs (Yin, 2018). As with all data collection techniques, care must be taken to ensure the results are meaningful and valid.

Once categories and themes were detected, the related data were connected to their corresponding place in the coded data. An extension of this was the organization of the other sources of data, documents. As explained earlier, participants shared these documents in a secure way. Then, the documents were organized by type and coded based on their content. This feature of case study methodology allowed for further confirmation of cross case synthesis. Consensus among participants was achieved using pattern matching, category construction, and cross-case synthesis. In Chapter 4, these categories are presented.

## Ethical Considerations

A fundamental ethical consideration of all research is balancing understanding the phenomenon enough to craft an effective research design while not imposing preconceived

notions about the study (Yin, 2018). Although it was posited in Chapter 1 that the presumption of competence was an accepted assumption of this dissertation, interview questions were presented with as little bias on the part of the researcher as possible. This was done so the teachers involved could express contrary views even if they advocated for access to inclusive opportunities for their students.

Current educators have been under significant stress; to appropriately address this stress, safeguards were built into this study to protect and support them when discussing the barriers and challenges they face in facilitating inclusion of their students with ESN. These safeguards included multiple choices to make the participant more comfortable (e.g., in person or Zoom interviews, the location of the interview, assuring the participant if they are uncomfortable answering any question they do not need to do so) and the extra time allowance in the event an interview ran over. Additionally, students with ESN communicate differently from their peers; as such, they are exceptionally at risk of being taken advantage. For these reasons, no direct observations of classrooms were conducted to protect their anonymity.

Another essential consideration was the protection of the human subjects of the study. This study was approved through Chapman University's Institutional Review Board and permission was obtained to conduct this study. Informed consent was required for a participant to be involved. Participant protection also requires management of data to be secure and confidential. All names were swapped for pseudonyms and only one key of the names existed in the hard copy personal documents of the researcher. No identifiable information about any participants or stories were included in this dissertation.

## Summary

In this methodology chapter, the study's protocol was explained. First, the study's research questions were listed. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify how educators facilitate access to inclusive opportunities for students with ESN in K–12 education, including identifying what educational practices they use and what challenges and barriers they experience. Research methodologies were explored and qualitative research in education was chosen for this dissertation. The various research designs available under qualitative research were investigated and case study design was illustrated. The various types of case study designs and protocols were illustrated. The population was identified as educators of students with ESN and sample selection procedures of convenience and purposeful sampling were explained. The various sources of data as well as validity and reliability were depicted. The data collection, management, and analysis procedures were outlined, and various ethical considerations and limitations were discussed.

The challenges current educators face, particularly education of students with ESN, are complex and multilayered. Unique methods must be used to inspect such a complicated phenomenon properly. Qualitative education research provided a unique method to flexibly meet the needs of a study. Case study research detailed the context of a phenomenon and how it related to the stakeholders' lived experiences. As limited research exists on students with ESN, case study methodology provided a promising avenue for analyzing school-based phenomena.

In the next chapter, the results of this study are reviewed through the presentation of findings in each research question. This includes facilitators of access for the first research question, education practices for the second research question, and barriers to access for the third research question.

# Chapter 4: Results

The results of this study are presented in response to each research question. In response to the first research question, the access opportunities are described. Following this, the supports to facilitate access illustrated by participants are detailed. Second, the educational practices participants used to facilitate this access are presented. Lastly, the challenges and barriers participants teaching in self-contained settings face when facilitating this access for their students with ESN are illuminated. Prior to delving into the results, however, it is important to acknowledge the participants' backgrounds and experiences as they pertain to disability. This sets a foundation for their voice and perspectives that are analyzed in the following sections.

## Participant Experience

This section presents the participants' views and experiences with disability, including their previous experiences and exposure to people with disabilities, their teacher preparation programs, their personal views on disability, and the experiences that supported them in pursuing a career in special education. These experiences are essential to understand and provide much needed context for the subsequent findings.

Participants were exposed to disability in a variety of ways growing up. Brooke and Gracie both had siblings with a disability, which greatly influenced their views on people with disabilities. Stephanie and Beth both had an extended family member with a disability. Lucy and Isabelle reflected they were exposed to people with disabilities when they participated in a sleep-away camp with people with disabilities while they were in high school. Unlike Lucy and Isabelle, Kimberly was immersed in the disability community from a young age. She babysat children with disabilities in her neighborhood and was struck by the realization that the child "was not living a life of inclusion."

The participants' views on persons with disabilities and their journeys to becoming extensive support needs (ESN) teachers are a culmination of a wide array of experiences. All participants' families valued education, and they were expected to attend college. Four of the nine participants were first-generation college students. Both Madeline and Jackie had personal experience with having a disability, as they both had needs in the area of speech. Kimberly recalled marching in San Francisco for disability rights in the 1990s.

Participants asserted their experiences with disability growing up heavily influenced their decisions to become special education teachers. Many participants reasoned they had always wanted to become a teacher. Kimberly, Brooke, and Gracie were immersed in the disability community, and those experiences led them to pursue becoming an educator. When describing why they pursued this avenue, Gracie said, "I really just saw the impact that good teachers had on my sister and then bad teachers. And so, I wanted to be able to be that good teacher for kids and give them a voice when nobody else was." Brooke also recalled, "And me realizing that they had so much value and work to be somebody who believed in them and saw that for them is just pretty much why." Jackie had an administrator try to talk her out of pursuing special education, but she observed a specific teacher and fell in love. She said, "It was one of those things that's like, I said, I can do this. I want to do this."

The participants' experiences varied in their teacher education programs. Six participants found their preparation programs to be supportive and reinforced their views on disability. Madeline was the only participant who felt her credential program needed to be more supportive. Stephanie maintained the observation requirement in her program provided her with a pivotal experience that greatly influenced her decision to choose ESN. She said:

> And I went to mod severe first, and I said . . . I know what I want to do. I'm good. And ever since then, it's just that's it. It didn't change. I went to him, and I was like, no, I want to do mod/severe.

The participant demographics and experiences set the foundation for the results their interviews yielded.

**Research Question 1**

This study's first and leading research question asked: How do educators in self-contained settings facilitate access to general education (GE) curriculum and peers for students with ESN? At the teacher/classroom level? At the school level? At the district/community level? The various access opportunities participants recalled presented in the following section, including standard, curriculum, and extracurricular access opportunities. This presentation is followed by future access opportunities in which participants voiced interest and artificial access opportunities participants felt were inauthentic. The supports used to facilitate access to these access opportunities are then detailed. These supports include the following categories: general supports, special education support, parent support, GE support, other supports, activities to support access efforts, and ideal supports for inclusion.

**Access Opportunities**

The access opportunities participants described fell into three main categories: standard, curriculum, and extracurricular. Standard access opportunities included lunch and recess, school-wide activities, assemblies and field trips, and special education-specific events. Curriculum opportunities included electives, specific curriculums and projects, and core subjects. Extracurricular opportunities included sports, clubs, dances, and drama.

In addition to the three main types of access opportunities, two categories emerged that centered on participants' experiences with access opportunities. These areas included future and artificial access opportunities. Future access opportunities were future opportunities in which the participants expressed interest. These included electives, coteaching, planning, and more opportunities overall. Artificial access opportunities included experiences with access opportunities that participants considered insincere. These included token special education activities, fire drills, and rewarding general education (GE). The following sections will investigate each of these categories in further detail.

Standard Access Opportunities. Examples in the category of standard access opportunities were lunch and recess, school-wide activities, assemblies and field trips, and special education-specific events. Among the nine participants, five detailed their students participated in lunch and recess with their GE peers. Participants characterized this opportunity as eating next to or adjacent to peers and playing on the same playground. Schoolwide activities were asserted by a third of the participants. These schoolwide activities consisted of cultural awareness month activities that Beth adapted for her students, a graduation ceremony in which Madeline had her students participate, and events like carnivals offered by Kimberly. Assemblies and field trips were also mentioned as access opportunities for their students. Kimberly offered that her students participated in the community field trips. Madeline commented that her students went on all the GE field trips and assemblies, and Stephanie detailed that they participated in the school pep rally.

In addition to lunch, recess, assemblies, and field trips, there were also special education-specific activities and events that invited GE peers to interact with their students with ESN. Stephanie communicated that a sensory-friendly special prom was put on for her students and

Brooke's school organized a group that met monthly at lunchtime, the purpose being to facilitate interaction between GE and special education students. They also participated in a coffee cart with GE peers and partnered with the student government to facilitate this. Examples of the advertisement presentation can be viewed in Appendix D.

Kimberly offered insight about a few events put on by her school's various sports teams. There was an event where the special education students were paired with a GE football player or cheerleader and they played scrimmage, as well as an activity with the swim team, which was less structured. She reasoned:

> And I saw such authentic interactions at that event where kids paired up by interests. I had a kid with kickboards and someone on the swim team wanted to do kick. It was more like there was a girl who was just chatting about whatever, and the girls that were around her were just engaging in a girl conversation. And then one of my students was going on the diving board. And so, the dive kids were really excited to work with him, and it just really felt authentic. That's inclusion when it happens in a natural way where it wasn't like we didn't have to pair up the swim team. People we just found. And then my favorite was the one student who faked drowning because she thought boys cute, and she wanted them to save her.

The next category of access opportunities focuses on the GE curriculum access opportunities.

**Curriculum Access Opportunities**

In addition to the standard access opportunities students can experience throughout the school day, there were GE curriculum opportunities. These included electives, specific curriculums and projects, and core subjects. Most participants said their students participated in elective classes with their GE peers. These elective classes included but were not limited to

physical education, library, drama, band, 3D design (jewelry), art, ceramics, photography, computer, cooking, makers lab, television, and student government.

Participants also noted specific curriculums and projects as content access opportunities. Jackie's site used a community block-building curriculum that all T.K. classes used in her district and a specific physical therapy curriculum. They completed both with their GE peers. Isabelle ascertained that her students participated in the school's capstone project as it was project-based and accessible to her students.

Participants also indicated core subjects as an access opportunity. Beth detailed that she participated in the corresponding GE class's science activities. The teacher facilitated access opportunities. She also endeavored to have her students access the cultural theme of the month with the grade equivalent classes. Other participants explained that their students participated in science at times.

### *Extracurricular Access Opportunities*

Access opportunities at school extended past the classroom and daily activities. They also included extracurriculars, which were portrayed as sports, clubs, dances, and drama. Kimberly, Isabelle, and Madeline specified they had students on a sports team like track or swim. Isabelle also offered football games as an access opportunity for her students to attend. A few participants described clubs as an opportunity, including the Lego club, the school's television team, the student council, the student government, and the yearbook. Isabelle shared the following about the yearbook club opportunity:

> So, an example, we sit in this quad area and the yearbook class is right there. So, they always kind of see us and are out there. We've become really good friends with this teacher who we never would've been friends with before. Our class is right there, she's

chatting with us. She's now reached out about having two of our kids be part of the yearbook team. They've made a point of making sure that our students are represented in the yearbook.

Dances were also represented in the data as an extracurricular access opportunity. Whether a common school dance or a specific dance offered to facilitate interactions between general and special education students, Isabelle, Madeline, and Stephanie all mentioned dances. The final area was drama and music; Brooke affirmed that they were able to incorporate her students in the choir final. Kimberly also recalled one of her students was included in the band and its performance. Unfortunately, these access opportunities can be completed in less-than-ideal circumstances. Examples of this opportunity are elaborated on in the artificial access section.

### *Future Access Opportunities*

In this section, future access opportunities determined by participants are explored. These future access opportunities included electives, coteaching, planning, and more opportunities. Participants detailed electives as something they were pushing for in the coming school year. Madeline established that she had been preparing for a unified elective to allow her students access opportunities while working on functional skills, such as cooking. Jackie reflected she would like for her students to be able to go to GE physical education.

Kimberly claimed "authentic inclusion happens" when spaces are opened to students with ESN. These open spaces include electives and content classes. She gave an example of what it could look like in chemistry. She referred to academic classes as the "last frontier" for students with ESN. An avenue to more academic access opportunities was coteaching, which Isabelle and Jackie noted as occurring in their districts presently but not for their students. Another potential

future access opportunity was including special education personnel in GE planning. Beth and Madeline affirmed that, ideally, special education would be involved and considered in planning events to support the creation of additional opportunities and the success of those already occurring.

Gracie, Brooke, and Kimberly communicated they would like more access opportunities like morning meetings or involvement with assemblies. Brooke expanded on this by saying:

> So, our ASB would have our kids be greeters at the assembly with them. And so that would be something whoever was doing that we would work on, what that kind of means and what that looks like prior to going. It would be cool if they could be involved in the actual assembly, but I still appreciate them making a space for them at all. And I think there's certain sports things, not necessarily on the basketball team or anything like that, but I think there's a lot of opportunities that could be created for the kids to be involved in that if they're interested. So that would be cool for that to happen.

Finally, Lucy and Brooke posited that if students with ESN were included from the beginning of their school careers, they would be more successful in those settings as they matriculate.

***Artificial Access Opportunities***.

The final category, artificial access opportunities, includes experiences participants felt were inauthentic. These included token special education activities, fire drills, and rewarding GE students for playing with students with disabilities (SWD). Kimberly had an experience where a student was included in a band performance, but at intermission, the band director singled out the student. Kimberly reflected:

> But then at the concert, what that teacher did is highlight him during intermission and said, he does have perfect pitch. And I get why the instructor was like, he wanted to

> highlight that, but you didn't need to say he doesn't like loud noises to the whole audience. The mother was mortified. She's like, "that's not what I wanted." I go, "I know that's not what you wanted. That's not what I wanted." So, that's not inclusion.

This experience was glaring for Kimberly and the students' community.

Other artificial access opportunities included documenting fire drills as time spent with GE. Beth was instructed to include these drills in their GE percentages. She said, "This is the bare minimum," and "It's just like, how is that mainstreaming?" Beth affirmed that not only was this a misappropriation of access time, but it was not an opportunity that allowed for any meaningful access for her students. Stephanie affirmed that fire drills are extremely difficult for her students due to their strict nature and the sensory challenges they present. Beth also had another experience where the noon duty supervisor rewarded the GE students for playing with her students. She felt that although intentions may have been positive, there were connotations of pity. Participants expressed feelings of inauthenticity and communicated that these experiences proved to be disappointing. Although these access opportunities discussed in this section appeared artificial, the participants identified a plethora of strategies that they use to facilitate authentic access successfully.

**Supports for Access**

Educators in self-contained settings facilitate access for their students with ESN with varied supports. These supports include common factors (e.g., professional development, social emotional support, presuming competence, and related supports), stakeholder-specific factors, activities that support their inclusion efforts, and ideal supports for inclusion. Common supports included professional development and training, social/emotional support, presuming competence, and other related supports.

The stakeholder-specific factors included support from special education teachers, administration, parents, GE teachers, the school, GE peers, and aides. The activities to support their facilitation of access for their students with ESN included school-wide education-based events and opportunities, GE classroom presentations, staff training, and difficult conversations. The ideal supports for inclusion included professional development, the right to self-determination for students, and inclusion specific supports.

Prior to reviewing these supports in greater detail, it is important to note that when interviewing participants to determine how, as educators of students with ESN in self-contained settings, they facilitated access to GE curriculum and peers, their definitions of equity and inclusion were documented. When asked how they would define equity and inclusion, 7 of the 9 participants articulated that it was defined as students getting what they need to be successful, whatever that may be. Brooke elaborated on this definition and said:

> I think it means in general, I think it just means accepting someone fully for who they are and making a space for them and wherever they are, whatever the environment is, and not trying to change who they are and needing them to be something different in order for them to be included, but for them to be it, to just be met where they're at.

Additionally, Jackie posited, "Inclusion to me, I think it affords equality amongst all the students, and it allows them to be, it kind of levels the playing field."

***Common Supports***

The common supports participants described included professional development, social emotional support, presuming competence, and related supports. Six of the nine participants maintained professional development as a helpful support when facilitating access. This finding is further validated in the following activities section. Most participants affirmed having

behavior, sensory, and executive functioning support as beneficial to facilitating access for their students. Many GE activities can be challenging for students with ESN due to the overwhelming nature and sensory-jarring environments. When given the proper behavior and sensory supports, students are more successful. In elective classes, executive functioning support is needed to help students manage work and time effectively. This support can benefit students' success in elective classes.

Notions of presuming competence, as discussed and defined in Chapters 1 and 2, were voiced by 66% of participants. Gracie reflected, "That they're more capable, and if you give them what's written in their IEP and the supports, they needed, they can do more than you think." Lucy also explained, "But I think just having that understanding that they are capable, even if they're working at kindergarten level, that they are capable to sit in any classes with the right structure and expectations." These expectations of students, regardless of circumstances, contributed to student success in accessing opportunities. An extension of this is the idea that students, including those with ESN, are GE students first. Most participants recalled this concept of shifting mindsets around facilitating access.

When GE and special education come together to facilitate access, a mutually beneficial relationship can form. All students, including those in GE, can be supported. Beth, Stephanie, and Jackie discussed that they supported GE with behaviors and sensory needs and that helped facilitate and foster good relationships, supporting access opportunities. Experiences such as these and other access opportunities resulted in many positive experiences; five participants indicated a willingness for future access opportunities. Furthermore, commensurate with the present literature on the subject, most participants asserted there are benefits to both GE students and teachers when students with ESN are included.

Some other general supports included financial support for students and families, language support such as translated documents, an auto-translating communication system, interpreters, transportation for students to access opportunities, curriculum support such as easily modified materials, and collaboration time with related services. Also confirmed were accessible social-emotional learning initiatives and social media.

### *Stakeholder Specific Supports*

For access to be facilitated for students with ESN in self-contained settings, the involved stakeholders must be involved in a collaborative and supportive manner. These factors included supports participants felt each stakeholder could contribute and support, including special education teachers, GE teachers, parents, administration, school culture, GE peers, and aides.

#### Special Education Teachers

The participants in this dissertation consisted of special education teachers of students with ESN in self-contained settings. As such, their insights and voices were prevalent in the data, yielding approximately double the amount of mentions as other categories. In this section, the following themes were ascertained from what they specified regarding how they facilitated access to GE curriculum and peers: special education teachers valued and advocated for inclusion, including valuing student strengths and growth; making access an expectation and not an option; seeking change; fostering community; supporting the special education teacher; valuing social and life skills; and being willing to support equitable training opportunities, their teacher preparation programs, and individualized education plan (IEP) team decision.

All participants articulated the importance of valuing and advocating for inclusion. This included valuing student strengths and student growth. Participants posited that advocating for access opportunities, changes of placement, fair behavior practices, more aide support, student

sensory needs, and necessary resources to families were important to them. For example, Gracie pushed for her student to be included more and to change placement to a less restrictive environment. Due to this advocacy, the student was moved. She shared what a parent said to her by stating, “You have changed her life. She would’ve been limited the rest of her life if you hadn’t fought for her.” Lucy also voiced valuing student growth by stating, “And I think even for my students for whom progress is quite slow, there has been real demonstrable growth and maybe their academic level is roughly the same but look how much more mature they are.”

By placing emphasis on student growth, other stakeholders were able to see the students’ growth. Jackie shared the importance of having strengths-based IEPs by stating:

> Don’t you feel like when you go into an IEP meeting and you talk and you hit their strengths first before their challenges and you tell them all the things their kid can, that it totally sets the tone and it just makes it so much easier and so much more cohesive than if you go in there and say, well, they didn’t meet any of their goals, or they only met three out of their five, or they didn’t do this and he has a problem with that or keeps eloping, won’t keep his clothes on. Then it’s like the whole thing is just sucks the life out of the room.

Jackie also offered this experience that shaped and influenced how she valued student strengths and growth:

> But I remember [TEACHER] was my master teacher at [SCHOOL], and all of her kids were in wheelchairs, seizures. I mean, this is [SEGREGATED SITE]. And they look like they’re sleeping their heads down and she’s still doing, what letter is this? What day? The week? And I’m looking at her like, “[TEACHER], they’re sleeping.” She goes, “no, they’re taking it all in. They’re learning. They’re sponges. They’re absorbing it.” She

> goes, and you don't know you're building these pathways, and you don't know when it's going to connect when it's going to hit. You don't know if you're on input number 5,000 or 752 and you don't know what's going to ignite. And it's so fun to see the growth in our kiddos.

A recurring theme was teachers making access an expectation, not an option. Many participants voiced meeting resistance and overcoming it by pushing into spaces and reminding all educational stakeholders the students had a fundamental right to these access opportunities. Participants confirmed different experiences with making access an expectation. For example, Isabelle asserted they "push" themselves into spaces a lot and made themselves comfortable in the school community, stating: "It forces everybody else to recognize that we're part of it too."

Sometimes, it is as rudimentary as simply disagreeing with the offer provided. Beth indicated, "So what she [principal] told me I could do is I could bring my student out who's getting the award, and then my other kids are in the classroom. So, I was like, 'no, no, I don't like that.'" However, sometimes it required more active resistance. Lucy reasoned that she was comfortable pushing and being "difficult;" she supplied a scenario when a GE teacher said that her student could not attend the grade level field trip and said, "I think I said I didn't ask you. I didn't ask you whether or not he could go. He can go." Jackie asserted a similar sentiment and said, "That's not their decision" and "[They] don't understand what they're entitled to. They don't. I think it's their right. They don't."

Isabelle elaborated on ways she combated exclusionary practices and made activities accessible. She stated:

> But I feel like you as a special education teacher, we get to tell them if we need to go first, if we need to sit in the front, it's not their choice to tell us what they think is best for

> the kids. And I think that's also, again, another way of separating the [special education] kids versus the gen ed kids. Because the gen ed teachers can just decide where they sit.

An extension of this practice included the teachers actively seeking change for their students. Gracie voiced wanting more access for her students was motivating. She said, "I feel like for some teachers, they might use that as an excuse, but if anything, I would use it as fuel." Isabelle reflected she wanted her district to recognize disabled voices, stating:

> I just think from high up, we should be listening to this disabled community on what they are saying. And there's nothing, I've had not a single sentence of education or thought-provoking things from my leadership, nothing. And I feel there's a lot. I personally have changed my teaching in the last 2 years significantly, just from what I've heard, and I've seen, and I have never seen a single thing of research or hey, check out this article or this point of view of this person. Nothing.

An emphasis was also placed on fostering community; Isabelle proclaimed the concept of fostering community in great detail, both in her classroom, with her students' parents, in the school, and the greater community at large. She offered this learning moment when she first started:

> For example, what are the biggest things was we go out in the community every Friday we take the city bus and we're out walking around. And I had a really difficult time my first year because I didn't feel like it was safe just in comparison to where I grew up that, and I remember I had made a comment out loud like, "oh, I'm not comfortable walking because of something." And one of my aides who had grown up in that area was like, "well, this is their home." And I remember feeling awful to this day. Awful that I even, and I was just casually, there was a lot of factors to it. We were three young girls walking

around and there was validity to what I was saying, but I really had to think of, okay, I'm a teacher coming into their community. Where do I need to check myself on this to make sure my instruction, my just, I don't know, overall interactions with families reflect what their reality is.

Five of the nine participants attested to having the support of the special education teacher. They acknowledged having the support of fellow special education teachers was very beneficial to facilitating access. This included having other special educators who valued social skills, life skills, and were willing to support with equitable training opportunities.

**General Education Teachers.** In order for access to be successfully facilitated, there is an essential stakeholder whose buy-in is necessary: GE teachers. Their support was specified as extremely helpful by 8 of the 9 participants. To encourage this support and facilitate general educator buy-in, participants illustrated ways they stayed in contact with GE teachers regarding their students and their participation in GE activities. Kimberly described a student information sheet that she provided to each GE teacher that had her students in their classes (see Appendix E). It included information such as their eligibility, the accommodations and modifications they required, their goals, and other important information.

Madeline described her introduction letter to GE teachers that included information to frequently asked questions such as grading and aide support (see Appendix F). Participants also described a monthly check in form and a GE input Google form shared with the GE teachers to gather their insight when it is convenient for them (see Appendix G).

When asked about details regarding those GE teachers with whom they created successful access opportunities, 6 of the 9 participants illustrated they strategically worked with specific GE staff they felt would be more receptive, cooperative, and collaborative. Isabelle said,

"I guess we're so strategic on we don't encounter issues because we know who's welcoming. So that's where we go." Kimberly offered, "And because we're handpicking, it's like, I mean, I know who I can work with." Participants expressed that they purposefully reached out to those they had positive encounters with and avoided contacting those teachers that articulated displeasure at the topic of providing access for their students.

Lucy, Jackie, and Madeline communicated building rapport with GE greatly supported access opportunities. Isabelle and Lucy attested that having GE teachers' and students' support with modifying work was extremely helpful. Gracie communicated younger GE teachers had better attitudes and were more willing to try access opportunities. Kimberly asserted a GE teacher had a great experience with an access opportunity, which supported future opportunities.

**Parents.** Parents are an invaluable part of the educational stakeholders that support students with ESN. Six of the nine participants identified parent training as a necessary part of providing access. This training included providing parents with any needed available resources. Jackie mentioned that she took more time in IEP meetings to explain the parts and process to support their understanding. Beth recalled the following instance: "I literally had one student not come to school because they were out of diapers, and the parent didn't know what to do. You know what I mean? Breaks me." Students can only have access if they can come to school.

An extension of parent training is their understanding of special education and inclusive opportunities. Kimberly explained that parents advocating for access opportunities are a great support. Lucy, Madeline, and Kimberly posited parents of high socioeconomic status tended to be very educated and knew how to advocate for their students. Jackie described an example of the Special Education Community Advisory Committee flier that provided families with helpful information, training, and resources on a consistent basis (see Appendix H).

Four participants shared having the overall support of parents when attempting to facilitate access was beneficial. This included gaining the support of the parent teacher association. Participants also acknowledged building and maintaining positive relationships with parents supported their facilitation of access opportunities. This positive relationship can be built in a variety of ways, but for those specific to access, gaining parent insight and encouraging open communication was important. In Appendix I and J, these efforts can be seen in the form of an introduction letter and a feedback form for IEP meetings.

**Administration.** All participants maintained administration support was necessary to facilitate access for students with ESN. They all identified one administrator they felt they could go to with an issue. These people included vice principals, principals, school psychologists, and program specialists. Brooke and Jackie articulated that administrative support trickled down and influenced the campus culture. Brooke said, "I think in any district, whatever is being preached or taught at the top and is valued is definitely going to impact everyone as it trickles down." The support from administration can go so far as to dictate a drastic change in access time. Jackie reflected on this experience with her previous principal by stating:

> [The principal said], "Your kids are going to come to the assemblies. You can sit over here. You can sit by the door. You can bring your fidgets, your toys, whatever. But I want them all to come. And then if kids can't sit or it's too hard for them, then you can have an aide take them back or whatever."

When a different principal took leadership with very differing views, their access was limited.

In addition to the school administrator, 6 of the 9 participants maintained overall support and culture was essential for successfully facilitating student access. With this community culture comes peer support; 66% of participants found peer support to be highly supportive.

They voiced that they found GE peers very receptive to access opportunities, organic support, and interaction with students with ESN.

**Paraprofessionals.** Finally, Isabelle, Stephanie, Lucy, and Kimberly articulated that aide support was imperative to facilitating access opportunities. Isabelle supplied organization documents for securing aides and staff coverage for access opportunities (see Appendix K). Without additional staff, both during and outside the school day, access opportunities were not accessible. These extra steps to secure staff allowed for previously inaccessible events and activities to be accessible.

***Activities to Support Inclusion Efforts***.

The activities to support participants' facilitation of access for their students with ESN were categorized into the following levels: teacher and classroom, school, and district. At the teacher and classroom level, participants shared presentations on disability in the GE setting were very helpful and having difficult conversations. The school level included schoolwide education-based events and opportunities and the district level included staff trainings.

Discussions about the teacher and classroom level started with GE classroom presentations. Gracie facilitated an ability awareness presentation as part of the inclusion week at her school that was given to each GE class (see Appendix L). Beth had an autism awareness and acceptance presentation that introduced concepts of neurodiversity. Madeline also offered a presentation that she gave to the GE classes they interact with titled Understanding People with Disabilities (see Appendix M). In this presentation, she covered person first language, invisible disabilities, disability representation in media, and simulations. The initial slides of these presentations can be seen in Appendix L and M. Most participants maintained classroom presentations were exceptionally supportive to their efforts to facilitate access.

Also, on the teacher and classroom level, participants shared the need for having difficult conversations at times. Lucy elaborated on a story of a difficult conversation with a GE teacher that led to educating that teacher by sharing:

> I was in the workroom one day. . . . This kid was in my class. And a teacher approached me and was like, I think she was trying to be really friendly, and she was like, "what is that student's name? I see him walking around and he has Down syndrome." She referred to him as being Mongoloid, and she's old, but she's not a hundred. Yeah, I think she's probably around my parents' age, and I don't think they would say that. I was like, "Hey, I think the student you're talking about, his name is [NAME]," and I was like, "when I'm talking about students' disabilities in general, I kind of just talk about who they are as a kid and what their needs are because there's such a wide range, but then also as terminology and our language changes so much over time. And I just wanted to let you know, we actually would just say that he has Down syndrome now, and Mongoloid would be seen as a slur, so that would be akin to saying the N word. So, I would try and just stick to not saying that ever again."

This challenging encounter is an example of why facilitating access can be difficult.

The schoolwide education-based events and opportunities was highlighted by multiple participants. Gracie explained the inclusion week that she started at her elementary school. There were different activities daily and its purpose was to not only promote notions of inclusion but also to educate students and staff on disability. The daily activities included classroom presentations, a pledge day, an assembly, and a peer buddy field day. Additionally, there were activities for the GE classes to do such as inclusion bingo (see Appendix N) and sentence building visual activities (see Appendix O). Additionally, some universal supports were

integrated on campus such as a communication board on the playground to facilitate conversation and play (see Appendix P). Similar to Gracie's inclusion week, Beth put on an autism acceptance week at her school. The purpose was similar in that these efforts were made to educate students and staff. Some activities included a coloring sheet and activities (see Appendix Q).

Lastly, on the district level, Gracie commented that doing staff training for the GE teachers and staff was very beneficial due to having district representation and support. They explained the legal reasonings and the "why" behind some of the procedural tasks required of the GE teachers (e.g., attending an IEP meeting). Many participants reasoned having ideal supports they would like to have when facilitating access.

**Ideal Supports for Inclusion**

In addition to the factors that support teachers in facilitating access for their students, there are some ideal supports teachers would want to have. Participants voiced interest in additional professional development, the right to self-determination for their students, and inclusion specific supports. All participants indicated wanting more professional development and training. The areas they specified wanting further support in understanding ranged widely and included behavior, transition, medical needs, understanding intersectionality, neurodiversity affirming practices, ways to support different cultural identities, English learners, minorities, and lower socioeconomic and homeless youth and families. Kimberly, Madeline, and Stephanie wanted time to train paraprofessionals and GE teachers on disability and inclusion. Although four participants expressed that they received equitable training opportunities at their site, none specifically addressed disability.

Five participants identified self-determination as an ideal support when facilitating inclusion. They referenced notions of wanting their students to have the right to choose what they wanted to study and the ability for them to explore their interests. Lucy shared the following explanation, “And I think I think inclusion is a term that we try to apply equally to everyone. But we don’t really consider what each individual person would like it to be for them.” Lucy, Brooke, and Isabelle shared about prioritizing disabled voices. Isabelle said, “We should be listening to this disabled community on what they are saying.” Isabelle highlighted explicitly not wanting to discount the community within her classroom and said:

> And my classroom, they’re really, really good friends. They look out for each other, they text each other, they hang out, they have similar interests. And I never want this. I always think it’s this fine line of this. I don’t want the talk of inclusion to take away that this disabled community has true meaningful friendships with each other, too.

Gracie, Stephanie, and Jackie also specified that support from the administration, specifically for the purpose of including students, was an ideal factor. Jackie communicated, “And it has to start at the top. It has to.” Beth and Isabelle articulated wanting time to prepare and collaborate regarding access opportunities. Brooke, Gracie, and Kimberly asserted they wanted an inclusion specialist, someone specifically assigned to support and facilitate access. Stephanie proclaimed that she would like the administration and school culture to support inclusion and reasoned that students need equitable access opportunities. An extension of how educators facilitate access is the specific educational practices they use.

Gracie affirmed that doing staff training for GE was very beneficial, and it helped to have district representation and support. Gracie explained the legal reasonings and the “why” behind

some of the procedural things required of GE teachers (e.g., attending an IEP meeting). In the following section, the second research question highlights this issue.

## Research Question 2

The second research question explored what educational practices educators in self-contained settings used to facilitate access to GE curriculum and peers for their students with ESN. The educational practices ascertained fell into two separate categories: currently used practices and ideal educational practices. The current educational practices illustrated in the data were peer support, communication support, visuals, collaboration time, and frontloading and modeling. It also included self-determination, differentiating and modifying, sensory supports, PBIS, technology, and curriculum, which were discussed between 3–5 times and by 1–5 participants. Other current educational practices, including coteaching, schedules and routines, and frequent breaks and chunking of time, were only acknowledged once by one participant each. These educational practices, the frequency with which they were mentioned, and the number of participants that supplied examples of each are listed in Table 12.

**Table 12**

*Current Educational Practices: Frequency and Participant Total*

| Educational practices | Frequency totals | Participant totals |
|---|---|---|
| Peer support | 17 | 7 |
| Communication support | 10 | 4 |
| Visuals | 10 | 4 |
| Collaboration time | 9 | 7 |
| Frontloading and modeling | 11 | 9 |
| Self-determination | 5 | 1 |
| Differentiating/modifying | 5 | 3 |
| Sensory supports | 4 | 4 |
| Positive behavior supports | 4 | 5 |
| Technology | 3 | 3 |
| Curriculum | 3 | 2 |

Another outcome of this research question showed the teachers described current educational practices they implemented regularly to facilitate access to the GE curriculum and peers. Participants illustrated the following educational practices as both current and ideal: (a) peer support, (b) collaboration time, (c) communication support, (d) self-determination, (e) visuals, (f) sensory support, (g) coteaching, and (h) staff training. A comparison between these current and ideal educational practices can be seen in Table 13.

**Table 13**

*Comparing Current and Ideal Educational Practices*

| Educational practices | Total frequency | Current/ideal |
|---|---|---|
| Peer support | 21 | Current (17) and ideal (4) |
| Collaboration time | 17 | Current (15) and ideal (1) |
| Communication support | 11 | Current (10) and ideal (1) |
| Self-determination | 11 | Current (5) and ideal (6) |
| Frontloading and modeling | 11 | Current only |
| Visuals | 10 | Current (9) and ideal (1) |
| Sensory supports | 6 | Current (4) and ideal (2) |
| Differentiating/modifying | 5 | Current only |
| Positive behavior supports | 4 | Current only |
| Co-teaching | 3 | Current (1) and ideal (2) |
| Technology | 3 | Current only |
| Curriculum | 3 | Current only |

## Peer Support

The most frequently identified educational practice maintained by participants was peer support. Seven of the nine participants considered GE peer support was beneficial when facilitating access for their students. Phrases such as “peer mentors,” “peer models,” and “peer tutors” were all used by participants when describing these supports. Whether it be GE students paired one-on-one with students with ESN, placed in small groups, or unstructured opportunities, the support contributed by peers helped remove the barrier instructional aides and teachers sometimes unintentionally created. Isabelle, a high school ESN teacher, posited that the GE students who came into every class period served as the “biggest bridge of [her] students’ social connection on campus.” In her instance, each class had a GE student with a peer tutor or teacher’s assistant on their schedules.

### Communication Support

Many students with ESN require additional support in functional communication. Four participants mentioned communication support as essential to facilitating access for their students. Their students used a wide range of multimodal communication methods to communicate, including but not limited to communication applications and devices such as Proloquo2go and LAMP on iPads and Dynavox, American Sign Language, word and sign approximations, and eye gaze systems. Beth reasoned the importance of this educational practice by stating, "I have one student who has an augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) device. . . . I am very strict on him using it always because that is his voice . . . it's like, yeah, okay, you're nonverbal, but you also have a voice and it's right there."

### Visuals

Four participants stipulated visuals were essential to providing access for their students. Brooke asserted she made visuals for a cooking class, and those visuals made things accessible to all students, especially those who were English learners. Madeline emphasized she created a visual board bank for her students who needed reading support, which helped them access the content. Jackie commented that they had visual schedules for each student they reviewed throughout the day. Every activity was broken down into visuals, and this also supported English learners. Lucy used many visuals and supplied visuals support students in these access situations; these can be found in Appendix R. Jen also elaborated on visuals they used frequently during access opportunities (see Appendices S and T).

### Collaboration Time

Collaboration time was ascertained as an essential educational practice teachers used when facilitating student access. Four of the nine participants emphasized the importance of

collaboration time with educational stakeholders. Collaboration with GE teachers and related services were explicitly detailed. Isabelle and Madeline asserted they collaborated with the GE teachers to ensure their students' time in GE was successful. Beth offered having extra time to support GE teachers with what to expect was helpful. Beth and Lucy communicated that time to collaborate with related service providers' aides to facilitate access was essential. Lucy stated:

> I think really strong related service providers who are willing and able to set time aside to collaborate and aren't just focused on the half hour they're with a student and are willing to kind of apply their knowledge to supporting their whole school day is the single greatest thing.

**Frontloading and Modeling**

Isabelle, Kimberly, and Madeline reflected that they front-loaded students before entering a situation. Isabelle, Beth, and Lucy specified they used social stories to front load students. Lucy stipulated:

> We would take walks past the classroom and that they'd go to, and we'd be like, look, remember that's Mr. NAME's room. You're going to be there later, working on whatever. They all had individualized schedules, so we'd kind of be referring to them all day, and they sort of got accustomed to it over time.

Isabelle and Brooke explained that they role-played situations. Madeline and Beth recalled they used modeling to demonstrate expectations. Beth supplied an example of an interactive frontloading activity about following a daily schedule that had students practice recreating a schedule and answering questions about it to ensure comprehension. This activity can be seen in Appendix U.

### Sensory Supports

Beth, Jackie, and Lucy emphasized the importance of providing sensory support for students to be successful. Jackie's school was creating a sensory room for their students. An example was Lucy's class, which would be more apt to access the GE curriculum and peers if there were multiple learning environments, such as a collaborative room and a quiet study room. Lucy presented a picture that depicted a sensory schedule for her classroom that included different activities in the touch, deep pressure, movement, and heavy body work areas (see Appendix V). She recalled her students had unique sensory needs that had to be addressed to participate in GE access opportunities.

### Self Determination

The concept of self-determination was highlighted by multiple participants as they emphasized the importance of the opportunity for students to be active members in decisions related to their learning. Lucy commented on this stating, "And I think inclusion is a term that we try to apply equally to everyone. But we don't really consider what each individual person would like it to be for them." Isabelle noted that she had her students become active members in their education by participating in and then facilitating their IEPs. They prepared all year for it, allowing the students to share their interests and preferences and for the team to use that as a guide.

Another example of self-determination practices included Lucy wanting her student's interests and sensory needs to be considered when determining which access opportunities to pursue. She reflected:

> But I do think it would be nice if kids were able to be like, oh yeah, for math today we've got two rooms. One is going to be the quiet room; one's going to be the collaborative room. And I think for my students, they'd pick the quiet room every time.

Isabelle emphasized and prioritized the disability community in her classroom and commented:

> And my classroom, they're really, really good friends. They look out for each other, they text each other, they hang out, they have similar interests. And I never want this. I always think it's this fine line of this. I don't want the talk of inclusion to take away that this disabled community has true meaningful friendships with each other too.

This concept of self-determination was further emphasized by Brooke who acknowledged:

> Whether they choose to do it or it's something they're interested in is individualized to each kid just like it is for anyone else. Not everybody wants to be an art class, but they have the opportunity to take it if they want to. Where I think in the education system, the opportunity should be there no matter what.

**Differentiation and Modification**

Gracie, Madeline, Isabelle, Beth, and Jackie elaborated on modifying GE work for their students. Brooke explained a modified science activity which is included in Appendix W. Similarly, Madeline articulated how she would differentiate a chemistry class to make it accessible to her students. She said:

> They can do anything at their level, like periodic table. Okay, great. Give them an element. They could probably memorize one element, but if you don't give them anything at all, they can't do something that isn't differentiated for them, individualized for them, nor can the other 55 kids in the class.

### Positive Behavior Supports

Isabelle, Beth, Jackie, Lucy, and Madeline all declared positive behavior support as an educational practice they used. These supports included but were not limited to using social-emotional learning, setting a timer, teaching expectations, using a class-wide behavior management system, bringing reinforcers, and providing options/choices. Kimberly and Lucy shared a behavior contract one of her students took with them throughout their time in GE classes (see Appendix X). Lucy and Jackie also produced examples of token charts with reinforcer choice boards (see Appendix Y).

### Other Educational Practices

The practices included in this section were mentioned a few times by participants. Technology and curriculum were practices noted three times each. Technology was identified by three participants who commented they used technology to facilitate access. Lucy and Stephanie explained the digital tools they used, such as Chromebooks with instructional-level work, for students to use in the GE environment. Kimberly used technology by having a QR code her staff can scan to input progress on how students are doing in their access opportunities throughout the day. Stephanie and Lucy shared that they used curriculum to support access, including Unique Learning System (ULS), Touch Math, IXL, Boom Cards, and Bottle Learning.

### Ideal Educational Practices

Throughout the many discussions about educational practices, a distinctive category arose about what the participants would ideally use to facilitate access. For example, Gracie, Brooke, and Jackie affirmed that peer support would benefit their students so they could move through their day without an aide disrupting them. Lucy expressed wanting more time to collaborate with the GE teachers and some universal supports such as visuals, core

communication boards, and more sensory-friendly activities and learning environments. Lucy also commented that she would like her student's interests and preferences to be considered when determining what access opportunities they participate in or do not participate in. The concept of self-determination was also mentioned previously in currently used educational practices. Lucy and Kimberly specified coteaching as something they would like to see for their students with ESN.

## Research Question 3

The third and final research question explored the challenges and barriers educators in self-contained settings face when facilitating access for their students with ESN to GE curriculum and peers. The barriers stipulated by participants were categorized into three different areas: common barriers, stakeholder-specific barriers, and lack of needed support. The common barriers included external environmental factors such as increased academic demands and negative perspectives on students with ESN as well as internal student related factors such as level of need and student behavior. The stakeholder-specific barriers included the following groups: special education teachers, GE teachers, parents, administration, aides, and peers. The final section reviews the systemic barriers that a lack of support and resources, understanding, and exclusionary practices.

### Common Barriers

In this section, the common barriers participants shared are reviewed. These barriers are organized into two categories, external (environmental factors) and internal (student related factors). External barriers consisted of increased academic demands and negative perspectives regarding students with ESN. Internal barriers consisted of student behaviors and the level of need.

In the external area, all nine participants postulated academic demands in GE as a barrier to academic classes, including electives. They noted these classes are difficult to modify, especially as the students get older. As the name implies, the extensive needs of the students in these self-contained classes means there are additional areas of need. Participants elaborated on trying to balance exposure and access, academics and social time, functional and academic skills, instructional level, and grade level. This attempt to balance and prioritize areas of need in the school day clearly caused difficulty for the educators.

In addition to high academic demands, another significant barrier was the negative perspectives teachers had regarding students with ESN. Gracie commented once a student becomes designated as special education, GE teachers often revoke responsibility, both literally and metaphorically. Jackie felt like her students were often discarded and marginalized. Jackie shared this experience with a sarcastic tone, saying: "Well, especially when you're told, 'oh, just put a video on for them. Just put a movie on for them.' I'm like, 'yeah, that's why they're here. That's what they came to school. I know.'" She also shared the following, "And so many times our kiddos are so just discarded or just like, oh, that'll never happen. My kid can never do that."

This attitude communicated a lack of presumed competence of the student. Moving to the internal barriers, almost half of the participants' expressed experiences of when staff had underestimated the ability of their students. Jackie had a teacher say the following to her: "Your kids won't get anything out of that anyways." Beth elaborated on a similar experience that she had with her principal, saying:

> So, we had one [assembly] 3 weeks ago and they didn't include us. And so, I did it in my classroom, but I was like, so I had a conversation with her, and I was like, "look, yeah, it's cool. I'm still doing it, but it's in my classroom. They're not involved, and they're

> supposed to be at their assemblies." And she goes, "yeah, but I don't know how to say this." And I was like, "just say it. We're not playing this game." "Well, do they even understand the award, what they're getting the award for?"

Kimberly reflected on this experience with an aide, saying:

> She had another student that also used to AAC, but somewhat verbal and it was her 3rd year working with that girl and she's like, "I know her. She just doesn't know." And I'm like, "she's sitting right here. She's sitting right here. She can hear you."

Lucy and Madeline indicated that the level of need students have, and their subsequent labels contributed to these negative perspectives of her students. Six of the nine participants acknowledged the level of need of their students as barriers to providing access. These included unique sensory needs, intersectionality when a student is both an English learner and a student with ESN, medically fragile students requiring extra adults for basic duties, and logistical issues regarding toilets (i.e., not having a bathroom close by). Another factor that added negative perceptions of students was behavior.

Student behavior was identified by 7 of the 9 participants as a significant barrier to providing access. They also communicated the level of behavior directly impacted a student's access to opportunities. They also indicated that safety was a concern or priority over access. Jackie reflected that student behaviors caused people to have a negative view of SWD as she said:

> If it affects 'em. If you're in the library together and your students are having a behavior and it's affecting the gen ed class that's in there, then they're going to be like, "oh, why do you guys have to do this."

## Stakeholder-Specific Barriers

The process of facilitating access for students with ESN involves a wide variety of school stakeholders, including special education teachers, GE teachers, parents, administration, and aides. Each group had aspects identified in participant interviews that supported teachers facilitating access and aspects that presented unique challenges. In the following paragraphs, stakeholder-specific barriers are discussed further.

### *Special Education Teachers*

At the core of this study were special educators who teach students with ESN in self-contained settings. Teacher burnout and fatigue were illustrated as a barrier by 8 of the 9 of participants. They attributed this to the lack of overall support and resources. Brooke reflected on this phenomenon by stating, "I'm a good testament to the burnout rate and putting in and doing so much and then just being done." The participants articulated feelings of frustration, feeling like a burden, feeling unheard, and feeling unprotected by the administration. Stephanie emphasized the lack of administrative support and stated, "My opinion was too loud." Beth and Lucy voiced feelings of inadequacy; Lucy asserted this point and said, "For me, it's always knowing that I could be doing more."

These negative feelings affect educators and their ability to put forth effort toward facilitating access for their students, sometimes causing discrepancies from class to class. Isabelle emphasized this point and said:

> And that's so crazy how someone's a fourth-grade student in the same district at the same school, their school experience can look so drastically different if they're in [PARTICIPANT'S] class versus the teacher next door. And that's so wrong. And I don't

know, it's not the teacher's fault. It's a system's fault that there could be so much gap between the two experiences. But it happens all over.

This discrepancy between special education classes affecting access opportunities was also reinforced by Isabelle, Lucy, Jackie, and Beth who communicated that they had fellow special education teachers at their site that did not pursue access opportunities for their students, and it made things difficult. The responsibility to provide access opportunities was singularly placed on special education teachers. Gracie, Beth, Isabelle, and Brooke explained feelings that it was their responsibility, and theirs alone, to provide/facilitate access opportunities. Beth offered that this even meant financially because her efforts were not supported by administration. Brooke articulated this concept by saying:

> I feel like that falls on the teachers to be able to provide those opportunities and stuff like that for them to then have those relationships. But if we don't create those opportunities, then usually they don't happen on their own.

Brooke and Isabelle affirmed that sometimes it was too much for the special education teacher to do. Isabelle reflected on this by sharing:

> I think what she said is really important too, of, it's not that they're not good aides or good teachers. The people that I'm thinking of are great. They're doing their job description day to day, but unfortunately to be included into really have opportunities, it's so much extra that is not in our job description. So, it's not doing anything wrong by not doing.

Brooke, Lucy, Madeline, and Kimberly also communicated the concern that their efforts and gains toward inclusion would not last.

### *General Education Teachers*

GE teachers are a crucial part of facilitating access to GE curriculum and peers. Their buy-in and support is necessary to providing opportunities. All nine participants ascertained GE teacher attitudes toward their students and inclusion as barriers. Whether it be outright negative or apathy, the resistance persists. Madeline reflected that she referred to her students as "kids with paperwork" to show GE teachers they were the same as their students. She also felt like GE teachers understand but choose not to show up. Isabelle recalled how balancing the two main views of her students by GE teachers was difficult. She offered:

> I feel like it's more, so you have two realms of teachers. The ones that have crazy high standards. Your kid does not fit the mold; therefore, they can't be in it. Or you have the opposite of like, oh, they're cute. They don't need to do anything, can just sit there and then that's not good either. They really need education on the IEP and knowing these are their services and these are their supports, and if they're in place, we can make progress in your class.

Lucy and Stephanie posited that GE teachers perseverated on students' behaviors. Lucy articulated that her aides often felt pressure from GE teachers and elaborated by saying, "They were sort of the face of my program." Beth experienced expressions of pity toward her students and their families by GE teachers. Beth and Jackie experienced strong negative reactions by GE teachers when wanting to participate in grade level activities. For example, Jackie reflected on an experience with a teacher who stipulated: "Your kids won't get anything out of that anyways." Beth remembered the following experience, saying:

> So, another thing that I wanted to talk about is just because I have sixth graders this year. I had a parent who I'm very close with, we're talking about science camp. Oh yeah. My

> students have never gone, they're always invited. But it's like when I actually pull through and I get things done and approved and stuff like that for subs, whatever. Last year the sixth-grade promotion party told you they're upset that we were going. And I was like, they're sixth graders. They get to go to promotion party too. And then they're like, well, I don't think it's a fit environment for them. It's bowling. I'm like, they like bowling.

Similarly, Jackie articulated a similar situation and said:

> And I'm like, well, but then I called the zoo, they're like, "no, we can only do so many on this tour." And I'm like, "okay, can we split them?" So, then I told the gen ed teacher, "okay, why don't you split your class and half of them can go with chaperones and run around the zoo and I'll put half of my class in with yours." And it was a whole big thing. They ended up doing a lunch break and then doing our group. And two being told my kids probably didn't care about the little spiel and they could have just gone and played and ran around the zoo. But that wasn't the point. No, that's not the point. But it was like they planned a field trip that only their students could accommodate. And it's like our students are supposed to go, that's part of their inclusion time too.

Brooke recalled that the label of "ESN" was a barrier for some GE teachers with whom she engaged. She reflected on this and said:

> I think the class, knowing that my class has students with very significant disabilities, definitely puts a label on them of teachers not wanting to include them in their classes. They're being more hesitant to do any type of collaboration. I don't really feel like the race had much to do with it.

A fairly regular occurrence in the data was the concept of an "old school" way of thinking by GE teachers, including resistance to supporting students with ESN. Gracie, Beth, Lucy, and Madeline all asserted feelings that this influenced stakeholders to not want to provide or support students with access opportunities. This included refusing to provide accommodations and modifications or to collaborate and facilitate access opportunities. Madeline voiced her struggle with GE teachers not providing accommodations outlined on the IEP and stated:

> I have my script and everything. I'm like, okay, if you choose not to, then here's her phone number and I expect a phone call with admin representation that you're not going to do all these accommodations. I get it when the kid has 30 accommodations, I try to be really realistic. If there's more than five accommodations, they're not going to all get met in the same setting, but they have to be met in some way. You have to try at least to do one accommodation when you're teaching or giving assignments, but they're just like, nope.

At times, experiences with GE teachers that were unsupportive was a barrier in itself. Lucy described a specific instance about a situation where one of her students was not initially given access to a grade level field trip and declared:

> We were talking about kids going to Yosemite and she basically was like, "he can't go [my one eighth grader]." And I was like, "why the f*ck not [NAME]?" I didn't say f*ck at that point to her. And she just kind of rattled off a list of reasons that were sort of bullsh*t to me. And then she kind of just ended it with, "we don't do that here." And I was like, "the f*ck you say to me?" So, I kind of was like, "okay, well maybe we didn't use to do that here, but I work here now, so if [NAME]'s family would like him to attend, he will be attending. Thank you so much."

Brook shared another example of encountering barriers with GE teachers. She described a situation where one of her students voiced interest in a fashion class after seeing a display at a school fair. When she went to the teacher to inquire, the teacher refused to let her student participate in the class. Access opportunities such as these can be also be hindered by parent influence, which are investigated further in the following section.

***Parents***

Parents are an essential part of the stakeholders' supporting students with ESN. Participants posited the variations they experienced in parent understanding. Isabelle, Brooke, Kimberly, and Jackie articulated that some families don't do not have and/or do not access additional opportunities and resources supplied by the school or special education. Brooke and Madeline postulated that the level of understanding can be affected by a family's socioeconomic status, age, and culture. Madeline asserted that many parents she encountered did not understand or know the benefits of inclusion. Brooke felt that the parent's level of understanding directly affected their ability to effectively advocate for their child. Lucy, Brooke, and Kimberly affirmed wanting parents to have more realistic expectations for their child. Gracie reflected that the district took advantage of parents not understanding special education, like putting them on waitlists for services. Additionally, they did not fully understand the available access opportunities. She indicated, "So I feel like they don't even realize, no, your kid doesn't have to just stay in this secluded room forever. There're options."

Isabelle and Kimberly explained that access opportunities were heavily dependent upon parent input. Kimberly voiced that some parents were extremely difficult. This also included parents with attorneys and advocates. Madeline, Brooke, Beth, and Isabelle expressed a lack of

parental support and involvement as a barrier. The lack of parental support, however, could be due to a variety of factors, many of which are circumstantial.

Brooke and Gracie reasoned that lack of home support was a barrier to them providing access (e.g., toilet training). Gracie and Jackie acknowledged that some families were faced with difficult circumstances such as needing to be in a homeless shelter. An example given by Stephanie was that if the student's behavior was not under control, they would get kicked out of the shelter. Jackie said:

> But with that said, sometimes education isn't always the most important thing. And we've had kids that were out for weeks and weeks at a time because they would go visit a relative in Mexico, or there would be some migrant workers that would be out in the fields working for a while, and they would take the kids out for a long time. And I'm like, "no, they need to be here in school." And they're like, "okay." Sometimes maybe I feel like education isn't the most important thing, but that's not really fair to say because speaking for them, it's just my perception.

Participants also illustrated that parents sometimes had differing priorities. Isabelle reflected that as a high school teacher, her students' parents were more concerned with transition to adulthood than accessing GE classes. She affirmed they wanted them to be "happy and safe." Lucy and Jackie commented sometimes parents just had different priorities altogether. Kimberly indicated that a lot of her parents placed an emphasis on social belonging. Madeline attested that the parents of her students with ESN are more "realistic" and "they're just thankful that we're taking care of their kids." Brooke, Madeline, and Jackie explained that some of their parents did not appear to prioritize access, or it did not seem important to them. Although parent preference can greatly affect student access, administration also has great influence.

### *Administration*

The administration, both at the school and district level, greatly impacts student access and, unfortunately, serves as a barrier at times. At the school level, 5 of the 9 participants articulated an overall lack of support from the administration. This manifested as the administration being reactive instead of proactive, having limited experience with special education, and seeing a discrepancy in support for special and GE teachers. As seen in the supports for inclusion, administrative support can have a significant effect on the level of access students experience. Jackie voiced that the new principal was not supportive of and did not understand special education. She stated, "Then our new principal's like, 'do you have to go to library?' I'm like, she always says, 'well, do they really get anything out of it?' I have no words" and "Now our principal now is like, 'eh, you don't have to go. It's better if you guys stay in the classroom.'"

At the district level, participants acknowledged negative experiences and interactions with administrators. For example, Beth was told not to call child protective services for one of her students by a district administrator. This affected her ability to feel comfortable reaching out for district-level support. In addition to not feeling like disability was valued at the district level, participants Isabelle and Kimberly recalled a lack of an overall mission or philosophy toward inclusion. Madeline explained she did not feel her beliefs aligned with her district.

These negative experiences left the teachers feeling like the district was unavailable. Jackie affirmed she felt she was "wasting" her breath and Kimberly offered she felt "silenced." Stephanie elaborated on a specific instance where she was literally silenced, or muted. During a district-wide Zoom meeting, she was advocating for aide training, and the district administrator muted her and would not let her unmute, effectively silencing her.

Decisions appear to be made based on fear of litigation and were not transparent. Lucy said that district administration behaved more like politicians, saying the right things but not following through. Gracie offered a particularly disturbing experience with her district. Gracie said:

> The other thing, we have elementary, which is [CITY], and they've had problems keeping teachers in their classroom. And it's, last year was horrible over there. And they were set. They would send kids that were supposed to go there to the other schools in our district because they didn't want their parents to go in for the initial observation of the classroom and see what a mess it was. And I'm like, "well, that's not my problem. You can figure it out over there."

***Paraprofessionals***

All participants referenced a significant lack of personnel and aide support. They also noted a lack of consistency and lack of expertise. Gracie, Stephanie, and Isabelle acknowledged that student access was the first to go when there was a lack of aide support. Gracie said:

> When it comes to mod severe students, like my autism program specialist, she does all of our behavior and is in control of all of our aids. She always says the first thing to go is mainstreaming. If we're short-staffed, nobody's mainstreaming, which ends up to be every day.

Gracie's aides also get pushback when trying to facilitate access from the other teachers and aides. Due to the teacher being unable to be in multiple places at once, the adult support personnel often served as the ones who general educators expressed their frustrations. Gracie articulated this and said, "They're trying to do their best, but then they're still getting in trouble by being yelled at these other people, and so they're just defeated." Indicated frequently, without

the support of additional adult staff, access opportunities could not be supported safely or sufficiently.

## Systemic Barriers

The third and final section describes the systemic barriers that were identified by participants. These were barriers that affected student's level of access to GE curriculum and peers due to outside influence and circumstances. This included a lack of support and resources, exclusionary practices and lack of opportunities.

### *Resources*

Looking at providing access as a whole, there was a substantial lack of overall resources and coverage documented in the data. This need for overall support made implementation difficult because support was needed across the board and was emphasized by Gracie, Jackie, and Beth. In their efforts to facilitate access, the lack of overall support in that endeavor was a significant barrier. Lucy and Kimberly confirmed that frequent staff turnover or lack of available staff also made implementation difficult. Gracie, Brooke, Madeline, and Isabelle referenced their students needing direct supervision by an adult often resulted in a lack of access. Isabelle alluded to this and said, "I feel like we're responsible for every move these kids make in every setting, it all comes back to us."

Included in this lack of overall support was the need for second language support. Jackie, Brooke, and Isabelle affirmed that the language barrier significantly impacted student understanding and there was a lack of support for English learners. Isabelle recalled the district recently went through a big reclassification of English learners. They were concerned that lack of proper communication with families resulted in lost services.

Participants noted a significant lack of resources. These resources included but were not limited to training, space, time, funding, curriculum, materials, and transportation. Almost all of the participants distinguished the lack of quality training opportunities as a barrier and lack of time to train aides. Participants also identified lack of space and time as barriers, including not enough offerings of electives, too many students, and lack of available classes. Seven of the nine participants also elaborated on how a lack of funding was a barrier. This included the teachers needing to fund the access opportunities, awareness events, and basic classroom necessities.

For teachers to facilitate access to GE curriculum, they needed access to it. However, 5 of the 9 participants attested to not having access to grade level curriculum and two indicated the curriculum they did have was not accessible to their students. Jackie confirmed this point and reasoned, "And so much of our gen ed material, we don't get all that. We don't get all those." The purpose of having the curriculum was to be able to modify it to meet the unique needs of the students. Madeline stated:

> I would like to have something that the other kids are doing. I can modify so much supplemental out there, just give me a scope and sequence at least of what I'm trying to put it all together. The others don't understand that.

Gracie articulated a similar experience and said:

> So, they made us sit in the science curriculum training, but then they don't give it to us. They make us go to the training, but then they don't give us the supplies. And they did that for math too. We had to go to the training, but they wouldn't give us a subscription.

Beth and Brooke also shared the alternate curriculum given to them was not appropriate or sufficient. Gracie, Beth, and Isabelle articulated there was not enough time to collaborate or prepare. Beth, Gracie, Isabelle, and Jackie voiced that transportation could be a barrier to

students making it to activities/school. As demonstrated previously, the lack of support and resources can greatly influence the amount of access a student receives. In addition to these factors, however, are exclusionary practices that are entrenched in the system of special education.

### *Exclusionary Practices*

On a systemic level, exclusionary practices were ingrained in day-to-day operations of programs, schools, and classes. One of these practices was the idea that one size fits all when it comes to education and access opportunities. Madeline alluded to this and said, "I think inclusion is failing for so many kids, especially the more intensive needs." Participants had similar thoughts on this issue. Stephanie proclaimed:

> I think that we need to look at the equity of it. For me, inclusion I think is going to look different for each student. And I think at least I know from my administrators past and present, present especially inclusion is let's make everyone fit in a cookie cutter. And I don't think that that's the idea that it was supposed to be.

Isabelle said:

> But I think that's where that problem stems down to, our education in society is not set up for it. So, there's just this one path to inclusion and it's the one type of kid that it's okay for which the ones that I'm saying are very involved are my kids with Down syndrome, who love to dance, who want to be at the football game, who are going to go up to everyone and introduce themselves. But what does it look like? Should I push my other kids to fit that?

Brooke communicated:

> I think it's important to make or to know that inclusion as a whole is not a one-way track for all, and that inclusive practices is going to look different for each kid, but that's why they have IEPs and that's why we do individualize things for them. But that I think it's definitely possible for the students when everyone's willing and open-minded to it all.

A portion of the theme, one size does not fit all, includes a lack of understanding around special education and students with ESN. Brooke, Gracie, Isabelle, Jackie, and Beth expressed that GE teachers did not understand special education and subsequent behavior and needs. This led to fear and not wanting to include students with ESN. They also voiced they felt the GE teachers did not read the IEP or want to be part of the IEP process.

This lack of overall understanding, even on the part of parents, was emphasized by participants. Gracie, Brooke, and Stephanie expressed they felt like their students' parents were being taken advantage of by GE students. Stephanie claimed, "If the socioeconomic status is so low that they know they're not going to hire a lawyer, they're not going to put in the effort that they should." Gracie reflected on a particular instance and said:

> When I had my crazy kid who was destroying everything and ruining the lives of all my students while they were at school, I kept saying, and I put it in an email to the district, and I said, "it's a shame that you're taking advantage of the fact that my kids can't speak and their parents aren't questioning and they're not going home and telling mom and dad what's happening at school and letting this happen. But if I was somewhere where the parents were more involved and more in tune with what was going on, you would've had this solved already. But because none of my parents are going to say anything, you're going to let it keep happening."

This extreme discrepancy between GE and special education students could also be seen between the teachers. This was acknowledged by Jackie, Gracie, and Madeline who stated the difference in responsibilities and duties could cause a rift between the two parties. Madeline alluded to this and said:

> I think that's where the gen ed teachers, again, that creates that separation. They don't want to do the work, but we have to do it. We don't get paid a stipend all because we have to do adjunct duty. Well, I'm sorry, my 10 hours of adjunct duty doesn't cover my IEPs.

Sometimes, these discrepancies could have drastic effects such as disproportionality in special education. Gracie, Jackie, Beth, Madeline, and Kimberly attested to disproportionality in special education. Gracie indicated they were one of the highest qualifying schools. Madeline said that their site was past the disproportionality percentage the state used. Brooke and Beth felt that race and class played a role in their students' access. Lucy asserted there was a lack of diversity in the school staff. Isabelle, Lucy, Madeline, and Kimberly expressed that disability was often left out of the conversation, specifically those on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Lucy indicated, "But people with disabilities, I feel like that's sort of the last frontier sometimes."

Lastly, although most of the exclusionary factors illustrated in this section were intangible, Beth's example was very literal. Beth indicated her students had their own physically segregated area to eat. She was responsible for cleaning it also. She elaborated, "Yep. We have our own area. And it's gated and yes. Yeah, gated. And we sit in these tables, and they have easy ups above us. . . . Custodian rarely goes over there." A segregated space such as this also equated to a lack of available opportunities for students with ESN in self-contained settings to access their GE peers. This lack of opportunities is described in the next segment.

### *Opportunities*

Similar to the first section in this chapter, opportunities themselves are essential in the process of providing access. Isabelle, Beth, Brooke, Gracie, and Kimberly asserted that there was a lack of opportunities for ESN students and those of lower socioeconomic status. Isabelle posited that a student's level of access could vary greatly depending on the teacher they have which was not equitable or fair. Stephanie reasoned her students with ESN did not receive equitable counseling support.

Lucy recalled a specific instance when her students did not have the same opportunity to participate in a grade level field trip. The student's placement in a self-contained class was itself a barrier; Gracie said, "So for my kids, it's all or nothing. You're either a mild mod, an inclusion student or you're a mod severe student. There's not in between." The amount of student access opportunities can be affected by their grade level as Brooke's students got more access opportunities if they were in 11th and 12th grade. Even as teachers of a self-contained class, Kimberly, Gracie, Stephanie, Isabelle, and Beth emphasized that they received little to no equitable training opportunities.

Gracie, Brooke, Beth, Isabelle, and Lucy recalled experiences where both special education and GE students were not set up for success because there was a lack of past access opportunities. Isabelle emphasized this and said, "So I am really pushing for them to be more included in that because they're there anyway, so why are you excluding them? . . . why can't we be invited to that? . . . why can't we do that?" Overall, the lack of past and present access opportunities was a barrier.

## Summary

The findings for the three-research question were presented in detail in this chapter and can be seen in Table 14. The first research question included access opportunities and supports for facilitating access. The second research question stipulated educational practices participants use and the third research question recognized the challenges and barriers they encounter.

**Table 14**

*Summary of Findings*

| Research Question 1: Facilitators of Access | Research Question 2: Educational Practices | Research Question 3: Barriers to Access |
|---|---|---|
| Presumption of competence | Peer support | External environmental factors |
| Social emotional support | Communication support | Internal student-related factors |
| Stakeholder-specific supports | Visuals | Stakeholder-specific barriers |
| - Special education | Collaboration time | - special education |
| - General education | Frontloading and modeling | - general education |
| - Parents | Self-determination | - parents |
| - Administration | Differentiation/modification | - administration |
| - Paraprofessionals | Sensory supports | - paraprofessionals |
| -Activities to support inclusion efforts | Positive behavior supports | Systemic barriers |
| | Technology | |

In Chapter 5, the relevance of these findings is explored and organized by the research questions. This is then followed by revisiting the theoretical framework, implications, limitations, and areas for future research and practice. The chapter ends with the overall significance of the study and a call to action.

# Chapter 5: Discussion

Students with extensive support needs (ESN) have been primarily educated in segregated settings with limited access to general education (GE) curriculum and peers. U.S. Department of Education's 2020–2021 data indicated only 20% of students with intellectual disability, 15% of students with multiple disabilities, and 40% of students with Autism were educated along with their peers in GE classrooms for 80% or more of the school day. However, a literature review revealed that research on how educators provide access for these students has been conducted in mostly or fully included settings. These special educators are often caught in the continuum, teaching in systems with established self-contained settings while attempting to advocate for inclusive opportunities for their students (Taylor, 1988, 2004). Understanding the perspectives of special educators caught in the continuum is essential to mitigate teacher shortages, burnout, and present working conditions (Ondrasek et al., 2020). This distinguished gap in the literature reinforced the rationale for this dissertation and illuminated that students with ESN in self-contained settings continually experience a lack of access, and there has been limited research on how to remedy this situation.

As an extension of the rationale, this information solidified the significance and importance of this dissertation. The following research questions were created to research this phenomenon.

- How do educators in self-contained settings facilitate access to general education curriculum and peers for students with ESN? At the teacher/classroom level? At the school level? At the district/community level?
- What educational practices do educators in self-contained settings use to facilitate access to general education curriculum and peers?

- What challenges and barriers do educators in self-contained settings encounter when facilitating access to general education curriculum and peers?

This chapter begins with a summary of the study and findings, followed by a discussion of the findings. This dissertation's theoretical framework is then revisited, as well as the overall significance of the findings. Implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research and practice are then described. The chapter concludes with a call to action support the inclusion of students with ESN in schools.

## Study Summary

This study employed a case study methodological approach and was collective. Each participant was a single case, and the phenomenon in question was how teachers of students with ESN in self-contained settings have facilitated access to the GE curriculum and peers. Participants were secured through the use of purposeful and convenience sampling. The data sources were interviews, documents, and archival records. Data collection consisted of three interviews—two individual interviews and one focus group.

Additionally, participants supplied corresponding data such as documents, pictures, and other resources. Data analysis included multiple rounds of coding: precoding, initial coding, focus coding, subcategories, categories, and themes. Validity and reliability were ensured through the triangulation of multiple data sources, creating a synthesis across cases, and member checking.

## Summary of Findings

The findings of this study were organized and presented by research question. The different types of access opportunities discussed by participants were analyzed and included standard, curriculum, extracurricular, future, and artificial access opportunities. The first research

question identified facilitators of access such as presuming competence, social emotional supports, stakeholder specific, and activities to promote access.

The second research question presented findings related to the current educational practices and ideal educational practices educators use to facilitate access for their students. These practices included peer support, communication support, visuals, collaboration time, frontloading and modeling, self-determination, differentiation and modification, sensory supports, positive behavior intervention and support (PBIS), and technology. The final research question investigated the barriers and challenges that educators encounter when facilitating access. The posited barriers were categorized into three areas: common barriers, stakeholder-specific barriers, and systemic barriers. The following sections review the significance of these findings through the following sections: (a) presumption of competence, (b) collaboration among educational stakeholders, (c) self-determination, and (d) high-leverage educational practices. These overall key themes are compared with the nonempirical and empirical research from the literature review.

## Presumption of Competence

Presuming competence was consistently mentioned in this dissertation and the literature surrounding facilitating access for students with ESN. Furthermore, competence was one of four tenets in the theoretical framework used in this dissertation: disability studies in education (DSE; AERA, 2020). Of the nine participants, six expressed notions of presuming competence. This finding was consistent with the literature, which solidified a premise of presuming competence (Biklen, 2020; Biklen & Burke, 2007; Kurth et al., 2019; Kurth et al., 2021; Lowrey et al., 2017).

External environmental factors and internal student-related factors greatly affect perspectives of students with ESN. Participants described external factors including increased

academic demands and negative perspectives on students with ESN, although the internal student factors included student behaviors and level of need. All of these factors, both external and internal, heavily affected educational stakeholders' presumptions of ability of students with ESN. The factor of increased academic demands was mentioned in the literature only in relation to the differentiation and modification of educational practices, not as an explicit factor to be addressed. The negative perspectives were mentioned in the literature as a more commonly understood barrier one encountered when attempting to facilitate access for students with ESN. The historical background portion of the literature reviewed ascertained the roots of deeply entrenched beliefs that impact how people view students with ESN (Deno, 1970; Goodley, 2011; Osgood, 2008; Reynolds, 1962; Trent, 2017; UNESCO, 2006).

It is important to note barriers such as student behavior and level of need were discussed in the context of participants being required to fit their students into preexisting circumstances, which suggests a greater theme that these students and their teachers exist in a system that excludes them. This theme is addressed further in the theoretical framework and overall significance of the study.

This theme should be considered as a lens with which to view the work of providing access for students with ESN. These external and internal factors that influence perspectives on students can be mitigated by continued education. The right to access GE curriculum and peers is often dependent upon the student's ability, or assumed lack thereof, to participate in a specific way. Instead of the prerequisite for inclusive opportunities being students demonstrating readiness, the prerequisite should be on educational stakeholders to have a presumption of competence.

## Collaboration Among Educational Stakeholders

The need for collaboration between stakeholders and for stakeholders to have collaboration and facilitation skills was a major theme posited in this dissertation. These stakeholders included special education teachers, GE teachers, parents, administration, peers, and paraprofessionals. Also emphasized was the importance of stakeholders' shared responsibility for students' overall success. All participants in this study emphasized the role and importance of educational stakeholders, which was concurrent with the body of work on this subject. Although collaboration between educational stakeholders is crucial, the need for these groups to have the necessary skills and abilities necessary to collaborate and facilitate access was also encountered.

These findings were corroborated in the nonempirical and empirical literature that affirmed collaboration among stakeholders was essential to facilitating access for students with ESN (Agran et al., 2020; Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Ashby et al., 2014; Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Mortier, 2020; Olson et al., 2016; Ryndak et al., 2007; Shogren et al., 2015). The literature on this subject highlighted systems-wide change through the collaboration of educational stakeholders (Agran et al., 2020; Mauer et al., 2023; Ryndak et al., 2007). Furthermore, six of the nine participants recalled professional development and training as common support for facilitating access. However, the literature review did not mention it as a specific support or practice in facilitating access. Ongoing professional development is necessary to facilitate collaboration among stakeholders and is discussed in greater detail in areas for future practice. In the following sections, each educational stakeholder is reviewed.

### Special Education Teachers

The main stakeholders in this study were special education teachers, and their experiences, perspectives, and voice provided much-needed insight into the phenomenon in

question. Specifically, special education teachers valued and advocated for inclusion, including promoting student strengths and growth, making access an expectation, seeking change, and fostering community. The primary theme in this area was the need for teachers to have collaboration skills. These findings were consistent with Kurth et al.'s (2021) study that emphasized the importance of a teacher's ability to individualize supports, use research-based practices, have collaboration skills, and advocate for their students. An emphasis was placed on valuing advocacy as essential when facilitating access. However, these efforts participants described were extremely impacted by a multitude of barriers.

The working conditions participants described influenced the burnout and fatigue special education teachers experienced. The participants shared feelings of frustration, feeling like a burden, feeling unheard, and feeling unprotected by the administration. These feelings greatly affected their ability to facilitate access to GE for their students. Most importantly, participants felt it was their responsibility, and theirs alone, to provide and facilitate access opportunities. This feeling was reinforced in the empirical literature analyzed that asserted collaboration and advocacy (Conderman & Stephens, 2000; Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2018).

**General Education Teachers**

A significant theme detailed by all participants was the critical need for general educators to be collaborative partners, and for general and special educators to have the necessary skills to collaborate. This theme was noticeably limited in the literature. However, the importance of shared responsibility and ownership through collaboration was affirmed (Agran et al., 2020; Ashby et al., 2014; Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Mortier, 2020; Quirk et al., 2017). Although not expressly detected in their studies, Kurth et al. (2021) and Lowrey et al. (2017) emphasized the

importance of educators' high expectations and a strengths-based approach. This finding aligned with what participants recalled regarding the supports GE teachers can provide.

The data from the initial research question established the importance of GE teacher buy-in. All participants discussed GE teacher attitudes toward students with ESN and their access as a barrier. These attitudes ranged from openly antagonistic to simply apathetic and were exasperated by labels, behaviors, and workload. This finding was consistent with empirical literature that highlighted the importance of high-expectations and a strengths-based approach by educators encountering students with ESN and affirmed collaboration among educational stakeholders (Conderman & Stephens, 2000; Kurth et al., 2021; Lowrey et al., 2017).

**Parents**

Participants acknowledged their efforts to facilitate access for their students were greatly supported by providing parents with training and resources and advocating for their understanding and involvement. Participants stated understanding how to provide parent access and the ways in which educators can facilitate this based on parent need was vital for success. The literature stipulated that parent participation and involvement are essential legally and practically and considered best practice when discussing the education of students with ESN (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Ruppar et al., 2017; Shogren et al., 2015). The importance of parental involvement was articulated in all of the articles analyzed for this study (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Mortier, 2020; Ruppar et al., 2017; Shogren et al., 2015). However, the literature did not present barriers specific to parents as an educational stakeholder.

**Administrators: "It Starts From the Top"**

Participants ascertained that administrative support was necessary when facilitating access for students with ESN. Participants expressed a significant need for administration to be

knowledgeable and supportive of special education, disability, and efforts toward access. In both the nonempirical and empirical literature, support from the administration was posited. The nonempirical literature contributed no concrete information other than stating administrative support was valuable (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Quirk et al., 2017). The empirical literature reasoned specific practices administrators could employ, such as having an open-door policy, promoting communication among stakeholders, and providing site leadership (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Mauer et al., 2023; Mortier, 2020; Shogren et al., 2015).

**Paraprofessionals**

Participants were adamant that their ability to facilitate access was significantly impacted by the available paraprofessional support they had. Often the face of the classroom, paraprofessional aides are at the forefront of access efforts. They are most frequently the stakeholder supporting students with ESN in GE settings. Due to this, there is a need for further training opportunities for aides and for guidance for special education teachers on how to provide such training. Conversely, participants shared the lack of available adult support heavily impacted their ability to facilitate and access inclusive opportunities. With limited staff, special educators were instructed to abandon their inclusion efforts. It is necessary to understand how to train paraprofessionals on inclusive strategies and how the availability of personnel impacts the facilitation of access. Support from special education staff, specifically aides or paraprofessionals, was highlighted directly in the nonempirical literature, specifically in Giangreco and Doyle's (2002) and Walker et al.'s (2021) work.

Participants primarily articulated the difficulties that a lack of paraprofessional support can cause and how it impacts their ability to facilitate student access. The barriers participants reported were not noted in the literature examined. Paraprofessional support was discussed solely

in the nonempirical literature. It was established as a necessary support when facilitating access (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Ruppar et al., 2017; Walker et al., 2021).

### Peers

Participants attested peers were an essential support when facilitating access for their students. Most of participants' discussions focused on the positive aspects of peer support and its use as an educational practice. Fortunately, participants shared minimal negative experiences with GE peers. Peer supports, such as small group and intentional pairing, were also illustrated frequently in the literature review (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Ruppar et al., 2017; Ryndak et al., 2013; Toews et al., 2020).

## The Right to Self-Determination

An important member of the students' educational team is the student themselves. The concept of self-determination was an important theme in the educational practices articulated by participants. Although only one participant attested to self-determination multiple times concerning a currently used educational practice, five participants maintained it was a practice they would like to use. Self-determination was absent in the articles reviewed for this dissertation and served as a unique insight from this study. As postulated in the theoretical framework review, privileging the voices of people with disabilities is essential to the education of students with disabilities (SWD; AERA, 2020). A significant implication of this showed for students with ESN to be successful in access opportunities, their strengths, interests, and preferences must be taken into consideration. The concept of self-determination also contributes to the concept that inclusion is not one-size-fits-all. Each student has specific and unique needs, and facilitating access for them requires out-of-the-box thinking.

## High-Leverage Educational Practices

The second research question focused on the educational practices educators in self-contained settings use to facilitate access to GE curriculum and peers for their students with ESN. The current educational practices posited in the data were peer support, communication support, visuals, collaboration time, frontloading and modeling, self-determination, differentiation and modification, sensory supports, positive behavior supports, and technology. This study provided special education teacher perspectives on these educational practices.

In Table 15, the nonempirical and empirical literature review findings are contrasted with the study's findings. The relevance of the educational practices identified by participants can be viewed collectively through a review of UDL and MTSS.

**Table 15**

*Educational Practices and Non-Eempirical and Empirical Literature Finding*

| Research type | Educational practice | Literature findings |
|---|---|---|
| Nonempirical | Curriculum | Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Olson et al., 2016; Saunders et al., 2019; Trela & Jimenez, 2013 |
| | Universal design for learning (communication support, visuals, frontloading, sensory supports, & technology) | Quirk et al., 2017; Taub et al., 2017 |
| | Differentiated and embedded instruction | Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Quirk et al., 2017; Rogers & Johnson, 2018; Taub et al., 2017 |
| | Assistive technology | Alquraini & Gut, 2012; H. L. Kleinert, 2020; Quirk et al., 2017; Raley et al., 2020; Rogers & Johnson, 2018; Ryndak et al., 2013; Saunders et al., 2019; Taub et al., 2017; Toews & Kurth, 2019; Walker et al., 2021 |
| | Peer interaction and support | Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Ruppar et al., 2017; Ryndak et al., 2013 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Other miscellaneous classroom practices | Quirk et al., 2017; Ryndak et al., 2013; Rogers & Johnson, 2018; Saunders et al., 2019; Trela & Jimenez, 2013 |
| | Multi-tiered system of support (positive behavior supports) | Agran et al., 2020; Quirk et al., 2017; Kurth & Enyart, 2016; Kurth et al., 2017; Wehmeyer et al., 2016 |
| | Stakeholder collaboration | Agran et al., 2020; Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Mortier, 2020; Ryndak et al., 2007; Shogren et al., 2015 |
| Empirical | Individualized education plans | Brock, 2018; Kurth et al., 2019 |
| | Accommodations and modifications | Kurth et al., 2012; Olson et al., 2016; Toews et al., 2020 |
| | Universal design for learning (communication support, visuals, frontloading, sensory supports, & technology) | Lowrey et al., 2017 |
| | Peer interaction and support | Lowrey et al., 2017; Olson et al., 2016 |
| | Multi-tiered system of support (positive behavior supports) | Kurth & Zagona, 2018 |
| | Stakeholder collaboration | Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Mortier, 2020; (Olson et al., 2016; Shogren et al., 2015 |
| | Teacher's role | Kurth et al., 2021; Lowrey et al., 2017 |
| | Special education teacher voice | Conderman & Stephens, 2000; Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2018 |

**Universal Design for Learning and Multi-tiered System of Support**

Although UDL and MTSS were not phrases used explicitly by participants, specific educational practices often categorized under these frameworks were mentioned. For example, participant specified some strategies often used in conjunction with UDL, including frontloading, sensory supports, communication support, visuals, and technology. These practices support the success of all students, general and special education alike (Lowrey et al., 2017). Lowrey et al. (2017) maintained there is a "clear connection between UDL implementation and inclusive practices" (p. 232). Multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression are all fundamental pillars of UDL (Alquraini & Gut, 2012). Participants indirectly talked about this

concept when discussing how they used technology to facilitate student access through the use of multimedia. This result coincided with three nonempirical studies (Quirk et al., 2017; Taub et al., 2017; Wehmeyer et al., 2016) and Lowrey et al.'s (2017) empirical study regarding aiding educators in designing curriculum that addresses learner variability.

Participants reasoned several educational practices considered Tier 1 supports under MTSS including frontloading and modeling, schedules and routines, frequent breaks and chunking time, PBIS, and scaffolding. Participants did not explicitly mention MTSS, which is most likely because students with ESN are considered part of Tier 3 and the supports often recommended for Tier 1 and Tier 2 students are already embedded within Tier 3 students (Wehmeyer et al., 2016). Although these supports were not acknowledged by participants in relation to MTSS, they are practices generally considered part of the framework (Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Saunders et al., 2019). MTSS was discussed in the literature review as a beneficial tool for creating a positive school culture that supports the access of students with ESN (Shogren et al., 2015).

All participants acknowledged practices that fall under the PBIS part of MTSS, including, but not limited to, frontloading, modeling, scaffolding, frequent breaks, and schedules and routines. Four participants explicitly determined these supports are needed when facilitating access. In addition, participants only specified PBIS to be used by special education teachers and staff, which is similar to Kurth and Zagona's (2018) findings. Kurth and Zagona asserted for access to be successfully facilitated, all school personnel must be familiar with supporting students with ESN and their behaviors. MTSS primarily focuses on PBIS; references to this were found in both empirical and nonempirical research. The literature references PBIS as a best practice for providing access for students with ESN (Agran et al., 2020; Kurth & Enyart, 2016;

Kurth et al., 2017; Kurth & Zagona, 2018; Quirk et al., 2017; Shogren et al., 2015; Wehmeyer et al., 2016). The nonempirical literature also identified these practices (Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Saunders et al., 2019).

## Theoretical Framework Analysis

DSE was the theoretical framework used in this dissertation. The core tenets of the DSE framework include:

- Contextualize disability within political and social spheres;
- Privilege the interests, agendas, and voices of people labeled with disability/ disabled people;
- Promote social justice, equitable and inclusive educational opportunities, and full and meaningful access to all aspects of society for people labeled with disability/ disabled people;
- Assume competence and reject deficit models of disability (AERA, 2020).

Tenets 1, 3, and 4 were the focus of this research. Research and interview questions were formulated to ensure that these three areas were sufficiently addressed.

Tenet 1, contextualizing disability within political and social spheres, was addressed by answering the research questions on the following levels: teacher, classroom, school, district, and community. The insight this focus presented situated disability within these spheres and ensured data saturation. Each sphere encompassed extremely unique circumstances that must be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. Some schools and districts were wealthier and had significant support from the surrounding communities, which included funding where parents were heavily involved in their students' education. However, some had a different socioeconomic status and differing priorities focused primarily on necessities such as food and

other resources. For example, some participants reported students may experience inconsistent attendance due to their families being migrant workers. Considering circumstances such as these when facilitating access to inclusive opportunities is essential and allows for accounting for the whole child, including intersecting identities. Participants touched on the influence of race and socioeconomic status in a variety of ways that are detailed in Chapter 4. The findings were situated across this spectrum of unique settings and served as valuable insight into the phenomenon.

Initially, Tenets 1, 3, and 4 were highlighted as guiding principles for this research. However, the data demonstrated that Tenet 2 was also present. Although this study could not include students with significant disabilities for this research, participants expressed seeking the right to self-determination for their students. Participants voiced and advocated for their students' voices and interests. Although some students could have participated in additional access opportunities, it is their right to advocate for their choices and preferences. The participants did privilege their students' interests, agendas, and voices with ESN.

The third tenet, promoting social justice and equitable and inclusive educational opportunities, emphasizes this study's core purpose and significance. The need for complete and meaningful access to all aspects of society, including education, was represented in the findings. Presently, multiple educational stakeholders still heavily contest the inclusion of ESN students. Student identities also influence their access to education, including students of families with low socioeconomic status and different minority groups. Furthermore, there were examples of inequitable practices because students with ESN often cannot communicate experiences to their families. However, it is vital to note that participants wanted additional support to promote social justice and equitable and inclusive opportunities for their students. They were offered little to no

equitable training opportunities and mentioned wanting further training in the different identities of their students.

The final tenet, assuming competence and rejecting deficit models of disability, was threaded throughout the findings. Participants encountered many challenges and barriers in their efforts to facilitate student access. They also affirmed the importance of presuming competence and having a strengths-based, student-centered approach to inclusion. It was documented in the findings that perspectives on students with ESN heavily influenced their inclusion or exclusion. For students to have meaningful access, these perspectives must change to assume competence. The following sections review the limitations, then the implications of this dissertation's findings.

## Limitations

Any empirical study will consist of limitations that the researcher must be aware of and make efforts to mitigate to ensure the validity of the data collected and subsequent findings. This section reviews four limitations identified, including (a) application of the supports and practices determined in this study, (b) lack of diversity in participants, and (c) potential lack of generalizability due to the diverse circumstances of the phenomenon in question.

Due to this study's limited capacity as a dissertation, the application of participants' supports and educational practices were not analyzed. Although these factors provide valuable insight into providing access for students with ESN in self-contained settings, understanding their effectiveness was not within this project's scope. This limitation will be further elaborated on in the areas for future research section.

Another limitation of this study was the narrow diversity and representation of participants. The representation of race, socioeconomic status, and age level in the participants'

classrooms and schools was evenly distributed, providing valuable insight. However, the participants all identified as female, only one identified as Hispanic, and the remaining participants identified as White. Some participants alluded to being aware of the lack of diversity in educators at their sites. This limitation also speaks to a greater limitation in the field of education, which is an overall lack of diversity in educators.

The final limitation of this study was the need for more generalizability due to the diverse circumstances of each class, school, and district. Although the practices determined in this research may help other educators, there is a possibility they do not or cannot work in settings with different circumstances. These limitations were mitigated through flexibility with participants to ensure their participation and by employing techniques such as collecting multiple data sources, triangulating the data, and including participants in the study through member checking.

Furthermore, a frequent criticism of case study methodology is its dependence on a single case renders it incapable of providing a generalizing conclusion (Tellis, 1997b). Erickson (2020) highlighted this issue by stating, “Oversimplification and exaggeration can mislead a reader to think that a case study represents a greater part of the whole than is true” (p. 2). Although these critiques are valid concerns, each can be mitigated to provide holistic detail of a complex phenomenon. According to Merriam (2001), the strengths of case studies outweigh the limitations they present. The phenomenon examined was meaningfully addressed through case study methodology and, although the findings may not be generalizable in all settings, they provide valuable insight into an important area of research. Through the review of these limitations, implications, including areas for future research and practice, became apparent and are considered in the following sections.

## Implications

Overall, this study provides clear documentation that inclusion is not one size fits all, contrary to current research and practice. As evidenced by much of the literature in this study's review occurring in mostly or fully included settings, although most students with ESN are educated in restrictive placements, students with ESN are left out of the discussion. Participants voiced difficulty when facilitating access for their students because the traditional path to inclusion did not account for, support, or meet the unique and complex needs of students with ESN. Implications of this research impact the community of education as a whole. Based upon the findings of this study, this section provides implications for practitioners including special education teachers, general education teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, and teacher educators.

### Practitioners

A fundamental aspect of school-based educational research is the ability for the work to be put into practice, emphasizing the positive impact on all educational stakeholders. This positive impact is especially true in this research, as the findings of this study resulted in a list of supports and educational practices that participants expressed employing. Implications for future practice are evident for the following stakeholders: school personnel, administrators, and teacher educators.

### Special Education Teachers

Educators of students with ESN can use the educational practices determined in this study in their own settings. This recommendation also includes applying strategies illustrated in this dissertation to mitigate the challenges and barriers teachers encounter. As an extension of this practice, it is important to provide continued professional development for special educators

on high leverage practices. Additional training is also needed to support collaboration and facilitation skills for special educators with educational stakeholders. In order for special educators to successfully facilitate access for their students with ESN, they must have ability to garner buy-in from general educators, support parent involvement, acquire administrative backing, and continue professional development regarding the use of educational practices. By mitigating barriers, there is hope to improve the working conditions of special educators and address staffing shortages.

### General Education Teachers

Garnering GE teacher buy-in is a fundamental piece when attempting to facilitate access to inclusive opportunities. Their perspectives and attitudes toward students with ESN are important. General educators need ongoing professional development on special education and students with ESN. Education is also needed for GE teachers to understand how to collaborate and the importance of collaboration.

### Administrators

The findings of this study made it clear that administration can have a significant impact on the level of access for students with ESN. This important finding, as well as other facilitators of access identified in this study, should inform administrators in their decision making regarding SWD. At the district level, resources for connecting with parents and families while educating and emphasizing access could be provided for educators. Furthermore, an area for future practice would be disability and inclusion specific initiatives at the district level to support inclusive systems and approaches.

### Paraprofessionals

Another significant factor in practically facilitating access for students with ESN to GE curriculum and peers was the availability of quality paraprofessionals. For students to be able to successfully access meaningful inclusive opportunities, available paraprofessionals are needed. However, to secure these people, they need an increase in pay and training.

### Teacher Educators

Lastly, at the policy and postsecondary level, this work can inform the ways in which educators are prepared to enter the field. Although progress is being made on a systemic level to alter the credentialing process, teacher educators can and continue to emphasize the importance of collaboration and access. For students with ESN in K–12 education to access their current settings, the implications of this research and recommendations for future practice must be considered by all educational stakeholders. The following section reviews the areas for future research.

## Areas for Future Research

The rationale for this study hinged upon the lack of empirical data on how educators can facilitate access to GE curriculum and peers for their students with ESN. Much of the literature on the subject was conducted in fully or primarily included settings. However, as stated previously, students with ESN are primarily educated in self-contained settings. In the previous section, the limitations of this study were examined, and as a result, areas for future research were revealed. These areas for future research include (a) further investigation on applying DSE to practice, (b) the need for direct observation on the implementation of educational practices to facilitate access, (c) additional research in self-contained settings, (d) including people with

ESN, and (e) research on how to encourage the facilitators of access and mitigate barriers experienced by special education teachers.

Although theory and practice are closely intertwined in a practitioner-based profession and field, the theoretical implications of this research are still important. Although there has been progress in the four tenets of DSE, further growth is needed. If scholars are to contextualize disability, privilege the interests of people with disabilities, promote access to equitable and inclusive educational opportunities, and assume competence, students with ESN cannot be excluded from the conversation. More specifically, a theoretical implication of this study is questioning if the notion of all students means all. Although there has been progress, findings clearly showed that including students' ESN in the conversation of inclusion is essential.

The next area for future research is for similar studies to delve more deeply into the supports and educational practices that successfully help educators facilitate access for students with ESN. Classroom observations would help determine how these supports and practices interact with other factors, providing additional insight into how best to facilitate access to GE curriculum and peers for students in self-contained settings. For example, peer support was identified as a beneficial educational practice. Observing student interactions and the types of peer support that best assist and support students with ESN would be beneficial. Circumstances affecting access for students with ESN vary significantly between each student, class, school, and district, thus creating unique situations. Further inquiry is needed to glean insight into how supports and educational practices can best be implemented across various settings.

The third area for future research is to conduct studies where students with ESN are primarily educated, that is, in self-contained settings. Not only has there been limited empirical research on students with ESN in self-contained settings but also there has been extremely

limited work on special education teacher voice in these settings. The significant lack of research must be remedied for students with ESN in these settings to have access to GE curriculum and peers. Additionally, there have been large bodies of work on the reasons behind the special education teacher shortage, yet very little has been done from the point of view of special education teachers themselves. If educators are to attempt to remedy this glaring issue, further research is needed.

The fourth area for future research is to include people with ESN in this research to privilege their voices and include them in the conversation surrounding inclusion. In order for authentic inclusive opportunities to occur and be meaningful, student interests and preferences must be considered. Additionally, students with ESN should be able to advocate for their unique needs, including the various supports that may be needed for them to access these inclusive opportunities.

Lastly, research should be done on how to best support educational stakeholders, specifically special educators of students with ESN in self-contained settings, and how to mitigate confirmed barriers and challenges. If the facilitators of access and barriers to access are identified, further empirical research on the topic could provide additional guidance on implementing these supports and practices across settings while also informing site and district administrators. The next section outlines the overall significance of the study followed by the conclusion to this dissertation.

## Overall Significance of the Study

When looking at the overall significance of these findings, it is essential to acknowledge that I fully recognize and embrace the right to full inclusion for all people. In an ideal world, all students would be educated together, with whatever necessary supports they require to succeed.

However, somewhere in the 50-year journey of striving for full inclusion, some students continue to be left behind. Students with ESN may no longer primarily be in institutions, away from society. However, they continue spending most of their time in segregated settings with limited access to peers and opportunities.

Students with ESN have a fundamental right to learn, engage, and grow with their GE peers. They also deserve the supports required to facilitate this access. This dissertation provides valuable insight into how educational stakeholders can support including students with ESN. By endeavoring into this realm of research, researchers are not abandoning advocation for full inclusion. Instead, researchers are recognizing and acknowledging that this one path has been insufficient. Ideally, there would be one path to inclusion that works for all, but I am painfully and profoundly aware there is not. However, this dissertation's findings remind educators that students with ESN have yet to be afforded the ability to access this path.

By not valuing the differing avenues to achieve inclusion, educators discredit the efforts of teachers and exclude students with ESN. More humanizing practices like URL have clarified that education is not one-size-fits-all. When applied to inclusion, however, educators rarely deviate from full inclusion. The findings from this dissertation specifically highlight the need to acknowledge the various routes that can be taken when facilitating access for students with ESN.

## Conclusion

This dissertation aimed to determine how educators of students with ESN in self-contained settings facilitate access to GE curriculum and peers. As a result of this study, ways educators purposefully and creatively generate new forms of action and resistance while existing within the structure of the special education system emerged. It is a fundamental human right for all persons to have access to education. However, the mere presence of students with significant

disabilities in education continues to be often debated. Although advocating for full inclusion, valuable members of the educational community continue to have limited access. Educators across the board, specifically those in self-contained settings, need help to meet the unique needs of their students with limited resources and support while attempting to facilitate this access. They exist in a system that is set to exclude their students and their experiences deserve to be taken into consideration.

Segregation is supported by continuing to comply with the status quo that is the education system. However, by actively advocating for students to have equitable access to education, another step is taken toward an inclusive world. Each individual holds within themselves something this world needs. By resisting exclusionary systems and practices, educators allow students' strengths to come to the forefront. This resistance can come in many forms that have been identified in this study. First, educators must presume competence of students with ESN and holding high expectations provides a basis for access. Second, by facilitating and engaging in collaboration among educational stakeholders, meaningful access to inclusive opportunities can be achieved. Next, educators must consider what students with ESN would like inclusion to be for them and honor their right to self-determination.

Lastly, educational stakeholders can use the facilitators of access and barriers to access identified in this study to inform their daily decisions. High-leverage educational practices can be used by educators facilitating access. These active forms of resistance provide an avenue to inclusion for students with ESN. It is my sincere hope that this dissertation demonstrates there is more than one road to inclusion and these other avenues must be considered if all really means all.

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# APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Questions

**Interview A**

1. What gender best describes you?
2. How do you identify your race/ethnicity?
3. Can you tell me about your educational background?
    a. Where did you receive these credentials/degrees?
4. How long have you been an educator?
5. Were you in education in another capacity besides testing?
    a. How many schools/districts have you worked at during this time?
6. What is your current role?
    a. How long have you held this position?
7. Can you tell me about the demographics of the students at your school site?
    a. Age
    b. Grade
    c. Socioeconomic Status
    d. Other
8. What special education programs and supports are available at your school site?
    a. RSP
    b. Mild/moderate
    c. ESN
    d. Counseling
    e. Related Service Providers

f. Other

9. Which of these programs/supports do you work with/utilize on a regular/semiregular basis? What is the experience level of these staff?
10. Can you tell me about the demographics of the students in your class?
    a. Age
    b. Grade
    c. Socioeconomic Status
    d. Other
11. What are the LRE percentages of the students per their Individualized Education Plans (IEP)?
12. Students spend % of their day outside of general education:
    a. <80%
    b. 60%-79%
    c. 40%-59%
    d. >40%
13. Is your classroom considered a self-contained setting, Special Day Class (SDC), or variation thereof?
14. What are the eligibilities of the students in your classroom?
15. Are there any other unique needs that your students may have that may specialized staffing, training, or equipment?
    a. If so, please describe in detail.
16. Do your students participate in alternative assessments?

17. How much additional adult support do you have in your classroom? In what capacities?
    a. aides/support staff
    b. related services staff
    c. volunteers
    d. other
18. Growing up, did you have any exposure or experiences with people with disabilities? Significant disabilities?
    a. What about the inclusion of those people?
19. What was your experience with education growing up?
    a. Did anyone in your family (parents/siblings) go to college?
    b. If so, what?
20. Tell me a bit about your decision to become an extensive support needs special education teacher.
21. What experiences do you feel led to this decision?
22. Did your experience in your teacher education/preparation program influence how you viewed people with disabilities? Significant disabilities?
23. Have you served in any roles serving your school/community in any way? (ex. leadership team, PTA representative, etc.) If so, what were they?
24. What is the best part of being a teacher of students with extensive support needs?
25. What is the hardest part of being a teacher of students with extensive support needs?
26. What does inclusion mean to you?
27. How would you define “inclusion” in general?

28. How do you define “inclusion” in the education?
29. Ideally, how do you imagine your students with extensive support needs experience in an ideal school and community?
30. What would inclusion currently look like for your students with ESN?
    a. At the student/classroom level?
    b. At the school level?
    c. At the district level?
    d. At the community level?
31. What does inclusion/access currently look like for your students with ESN?
    a. At the student/classroom level?
    b. At the school level?
    c. At the district level?
    d. At the community level?
32. How inclusive do you consider your school culture? Why do you feel that is?
33. How comfortable do you feel broaching the topic of inclusion with those on your site? Why do you feel that is?
    a. general education teachers
    b. special education teachers
    c. related service providers
    d. administrators
    e. other
34. How comfortable do you feel broaching the topic of inclusion with administration or those at the district level?

35. How have some of these conversations gone? School level? District level?
    a. Were they successful? Why? /Why not?
36. Do you feel your values align with your school or district in regard to providing access to general education curriculum and peers for your students with ESN?
37. Do you feel supported in the endeavor to facilitate access for your students by those on your school site?
    a. general education teachers
    b. special education teachers
    c. related service providers
    d. administrators
    e. student population
    f. parents
    g. others
38. Do you feel supported in the endeavor to facilitate access for your students at the district level?
39. Do you feel like you have an ally in your efforts? School level? District level? If so, who?
40. How do you feel having an ally or not having an ally supports you?
41. How included do you feel like your students are on your school site?
42. What kinds of interactions do your students with ESN have with the general education curriculum and peers?
43. What kinds of activities (academic or social) do they participate in now with their general education peers?

44. What do these activities involve or require?
    a. What kind of preparation? Any work that needs to be done by staff from creating lesson plans, communication boards, social skills lessons, etc.
45. What kinds of activities (academic or social) would you like for them to participate in with their general education peers in the future?
46. How do you facilitate access to the general education curriculum and peers for your students with extensive support needs?
    a. At the student/classroom level?
    b. At the school level?
    c. At the district level?
    d. At the community level?
47. What are the most important/influential factors you believe contribute to facilitating access to the general education curriculum and peers for your students?
48. What is the most difficult part of facilitating your student's access to the GE curriculum and peers?

Review Educational Practices Definition: "The work in schools that create equity-based professional learning frameworks that ensures that high-quality teaching and learning experiences exist for all learners" (p. 171).

49. Do you feel you have been trained in educational practices that support you in creating high-quality learning environments for all students?
50. What educational practices, if any, would you say you use to facilitate this access?
51. Where did you come up with the idea for these practices? (Research, conference, trainings, teacher prep program)
52. What challenges or barriers do you encounter when facilitating this access?
53. What is the most helpful support you have received in facilitating this access?

54. What is a support you would like to have in facilitating this access?
55. Where do you hope to see education for students with extensive support needs in 10 years?
56. Is there anything else you would like to mention relating to what we've discussed today?
57. Who else do you think would be good to interview to further understand this concept?

**Interview B**

1. How do you define equity and inclusion with your students?
2. What role do you think race/SES plays in the lives of your students?
3. How does class/race impact your students experience at school? If so, how? In what ways?
4. How do class/race impacts how other teachers view students/your students and their capabilities?
5. Do you feel class/race impacts your ability to facilitate their access to general education curriculum and peers?
6. Are there students who have been successfully included at your site?
    a. If so, what are the characteristics that you think might have helped them.
7. Can you tell me about working with students who are ELL/low SES/minority groups?
8. What is it like working with their families? What are some experiences that you've had?
9. Do you feel like the families of your students know how they can advocate for more for their student?
10. How much do you feel like your parents understand /level of understanding to support their child and their access to peers?

11. How important do you feel like access to general education curriculum and peers is for them?
12. Can you talk about how the cultural and political climate at your district effects your efforts to include your students?
13. How do you think that plays a role in inclusive opportunities at your site? District? Community?
14. Do you feel like you could attempt an equity-based event/training/etc.?
15. Are there any identities of your students that you feel you need/would like more training or support in understanding?
16. Have you participated in any equity-based trainings at your school site? District?
    a. If yes, what topics did they cover? How did you go about being told about them?
17. What areas do you feel like need to be focused on for equity trainings?
18. In your current school/district climate, would you feel comfortable requesting equitable training opportunities?
    a. If yes, can you tell me more about how that would look?
    b. If no, why? “
19. Is there anything else you would like to mention relating to what we’ve discussed today?

**Focus Group**

1. Please introduce yourself.
    - Name
    - Current Position
    - Years of experience
    - Description of class

2. In your efforts to facilitate access for your students, have you encountered differing views of your students' abilities? (ex. family, race, SES, behaviors, IEP, etc.)
    - If yes, how did you go about approaching this?
3. Do you encounter staff (special education, gen ed, aides, admin etc.) that are resistant to your efforts to include your students?
4. How do these differing views affect your efforts/your students?
5. How do you approach these differing views?
6. How do you navigate politics for your job/providing access for your students?
7. Is there anything else you would like to mention relating to what we've discussed today?

Appendix B: Informed Consent

## ADULT INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

**Title of Study:**

Providing Access to General Education Curriculum and Peers for Students with Extensive Support Needs

**Members of the Research Team**

Lead Researcher: Meghan Cosier, PhD
Student Researcher: Megan Doty

**Key Information**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Research studies include only people who choose to take part. A member of the research team will explain the study to you and will answer any questions you might have. You should take your time in deciding whether or not you want to participate.

If you agree to participate in this study, the project will involve:

- Males and females over the age of 18
- Procedures will include an audio interview using Zoom Cloud Meeting application.
- There is three audio interviews.
- The interviews will take 1 hour.
- There are not risks associated with this study that exceed what would typically be encountered in daily life.
- You will not be paid for your participation.
- You may keep a copy of this consent form.

**Invitation**

You are invited to take part in this research study. The information in this form is meant to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

**Why are you being asked to be in this research study?**

You are being asked to be in this study because you hold a valid Moderate/Severe Education Specialist Credential in California and teach in a self-contained setting. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate.

**What is the reason for doing this research study?**

Students with extensive support needs are mostly educated in self-contained settings. However, the present research, scholarly literature, textbooks, and teacher preparation programs advocate for strategies that support primarily fully inclusive educational environments The purpose of this study is to gain insight into how educators in self-contained settings facilitate access to general education curriculum and peers for students with extensive support needs and determine what educational practices they use to facilitate this access. In addition, it will gain insight into the challenges and barriers educators face when facilitating this access. The information gained from this form could potentially increase access for students with extensive support needs in self-contained settings.

**What will be done during this research study?**

In an initial one-hour audio interview, you will be asked questions that relate to your experience as a special education teacher facilitating access to general education curriculum and peers for students with extensive support needs in self-contained settings. Following the initial interview, a second follow-up one-hour audio interview will occur. Additionally, you will be asked to participate in a one-hour focus group interview with other participants from the study. The student researcher from the study will conduct all interviews. If you give the researcher permission, the interviews and focus group discussion will be recorded and transcribed. You will have access to these transcriptions.

**How** will **my data be used?**

Your data will be used for a student's dissertation, journal articles, and academic conferences. Any personal information that could identify you will be removed before the data is shared.

**What are the possible risks of being in this research study?**

There are no known risks to you for being in this research study.

**What are the possible benefits to you?**

You are not expected to get any direct benefit from being in this study.

**What are the possible benefits to other people?**

The benefits to society may include better understanding of how to facilitate access to general education curriculum and peers for students with extensive support needs which will potentially support teachers of students with extensive support needs.

**What are the alternatives to being in this research study?**

There are no alternatives to being in this research study. You can choose not to participate.

**What will participating in this research study cost you?**

There is no cost to you to be in this research study.

**Will you be compensated for being in this research study?**

You will not be compensated for your participation in this research study.

**What should you do if you have a problem during this research study?**

Your welfare is the major concern of every researcher. If you have a problem as a direct result of being in this study, you should immediately contact one of the people listed at the beginning of this consent form.

**How will information about you be protected?**

Reasonable steps will be taken to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of your study data. The data will be stored electronically through a secure server and will only be seen by the research team during the study and for three years after the study is complete.

The only people who will have access to your research records are the members of the research team, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and any other person, agency, or sponsor as required by law. Information from this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but the data will be reported as group or summarized data and your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

**What are your rights as a research subject?**

You may ask any questions about this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in the study or during the study.

For study related questions, please contact the investigator(s) listed at the beginning of this form.

For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research, contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (714) 628-2833 or irb@chapman.edu.

**What will happen if you decide not to be in this research study or decide to stop participating once you start?**

You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study (i.e., "withdraw") at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator or with Chapman University. You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

# Appendix C: Coding Example

| Interview | Participant | Time | Text | Pre-code | Initial Code | Focus Code | Sub-Category | Category | Theme |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Interview B | Gracie | 11:43 | I feel like when I've had a couple gen ed teachers that are really supportive of it, and then when they go out of their way to either help me modify stuff or open the door for us to come together. Yeah, I think that helps. | Willingness/ open to change | Out of their way | Some GE supportive | General Education Teacher Support | General Education Support | Supports for Inclusion |
| Focus Group | Madeline | 36:05 | Because each grade level, every department has the teachers that are more respectful when it comes to sped, willing to look at their accommodations, willing to show up to IEPs, willing to be honest, it's a choice | N/A | It's a choice | There are GE teachers willing to support | General Education Teacher Support | General Education Support | Supports for Inclusion |
| Interview A Part 2 | Isabelle | 29:38 | Our art teacher is a new teacher. He thinks our students are his students. He modifies everything. I ask him what I can do support. No, no, no. I got this. So he does it all on his own. He has alternate projects, modified projects, everything. He'll ask my aide for support, like, Hey, what do you think? | Art teacher modifies everything | General education teacher does it all on his own | GE teacher supportive | General Education Teacher Support | General Education Support | Supports for Inclusion |

Appendix D: Coffee Cart Advertisement Presentation

Appendix E: Student Information Sheet for General Education Teacher

Case Carrier:

Eligibility: Autism; Speech and Language Impairment

IEP Accommodations and Modifications:
a contingency management system
visual supports
delayed response time
extended time to complete tasks
access to breaks and reinforcement
small group instruction
reduced/shortened assignments
use of manipulatives for math/science (if needed)
use of a calculator for math/science (if needed)
access to computer for writing/typing
group support
preferential/assigned seating
offered choices throughout the school day
use of sensory strategies
maintenance of skill through interval practice
introduction of new skill through systematic variations to previous learning/skills/concepts, a higher teacher student ratio
supervision during less structured times (such as lunch)
**KEY LOCK for PE**

SBAC and Benchmark Accommodations:
ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT

Estimated IEP Date: DONE (held in September)

General Education Classes: **CREDIT**

Goals (that teachers will be asked to provide input on):

1. when asked a question about what someone says or does in a large group setting, [redacted] will correctly answer the question in 80% of opportunities

## Appendix F: Special Education Introduction Letter to General Education Teachers

Good morning,

If you are receiving this email, you have at least 1 of my students in your class this year! Yay!

I am happy to carve out some time (maybe 10 minutes) to discuss the students in depth and review accommodations to help them be successful in your class! However, I know our list is a mile long to do, if you rather just read over paperwork, I will pop it in your mailbox.

I am happy to support modifying any assignments and tests, I just need to know. My aides can modify it on the spot.

**Grading:** Prior to progress reports/grades, I will send an email to remind you all of my students are on modifications and I do a mini breakdown of how their "passing" grade.

**IEPs:** I schedule out IEPs for the school year in September. I will invite you and I will send out a google form input form about the student in case a week before the meeting, in case you can't make it and parents consented. *I will always try to excuse you from the meeting as soon as possible.*

**Parent communication:** I encourage my parents to email you directly if there are concerns in your class and to cc' me on the email. You can respond with or without collaboration from me.

**Aide Support:** My group of aides are amazing and we are adding new faces this year. If there are any problems (i.e talking way too much), please let me know immediately so I can address them. If you don't feel there is enough support in your classroom, I need to know so I can advocate and get more support!

The only thing I need from you, please add me to your google classroom for the correct period my student is in your class.

If there are any questions, comments, concerns, **about students, work, or my aides,** please bring it to my attention.

My personal number is

# Appendix G: Monthly Check-In Form for General Education Teacher



## General Education Input

Please fill out this form, the more details the better. This is your written input for IEPs

* Indicates required question

1. Your Name & Class *

2. Student Name *

3. Is the student engaged in your class

*Mark only one oval.*

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- Other: _____

4. Does your student follow your expectations

*Mark only one oval.*

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- Other: _____





## Monthly Check-In

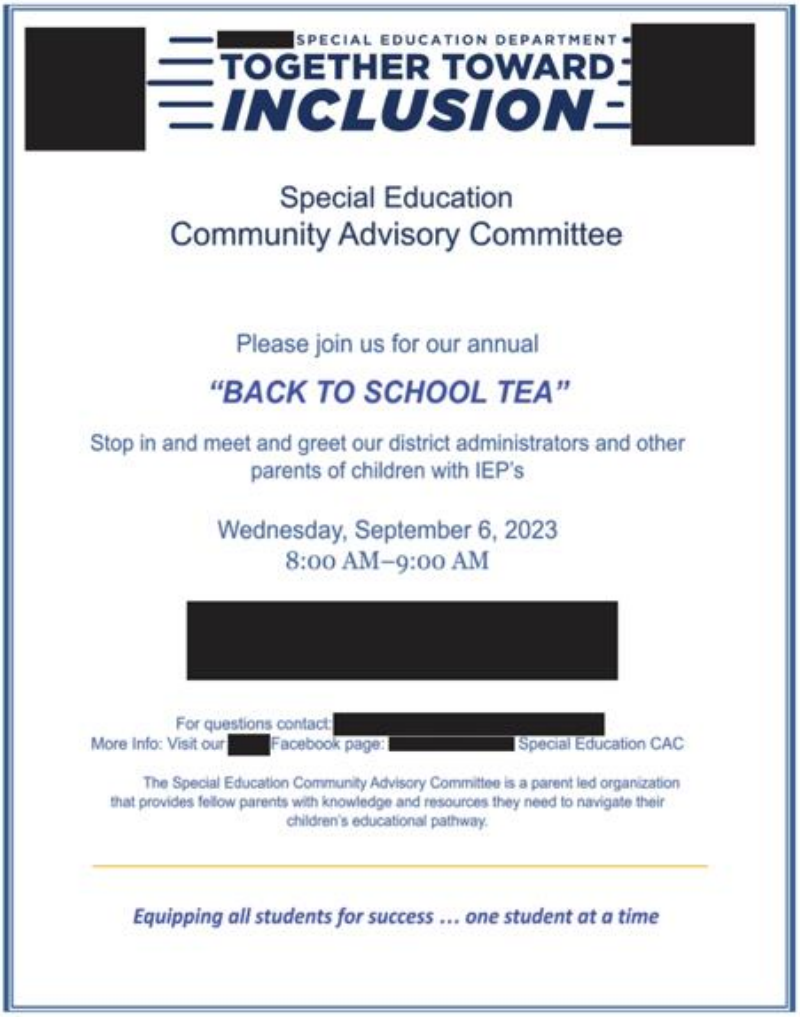
First, thank you for your patience, flexibility and kindness for supporting my students is my class. Please fill out this form so I can check in with my students & see where else I can support you and my students. In addition, it is extremely important my instructional team are doing their part to best support the students. Please communication with me if my aides are not following expectations.

1. Teacher name & class

*Mark only one oval.*

- [redacted]
- [redacted]
- [redacted]
- Other: _____

Appendix H: Parent Community Advisory Committee Flier



# Appendix I: Special Education Teacher Introduction Parent Letter

August 21, 2023

Dear Parents and Guardians,

Welcome Back! In the Special Education Department, the case managers have been established for each student with an IEP. For the 2023-24 school year, I will be your son or daughter's case manager. I will be facilitating all IEP conferences, assisting in overcoming obstacles, supporting the team in problem solving situations and assisting students toward independence and self-advocacy. Please check Aeries, Google Classroom, your child's assignment book ("minder binder"), and teacher websites daily to keep up with their assignments in all of their classes. I want to encourage communication and would appreciate you contacting me via phone or email if you have any questions or concerns.

Thank you for your support!

Respectfully,

Appendix J: Parent Feedback for Individualized Education Plan (IEP) Meeting Form

# Feedback for IEP Meetings

Hello,

As we prepare for your child s upcoming IEP meeting, we kindly request your assistance in providing our team with the best information to support the individual needs of your student this year.

This form is completely optional, but any information you are willing to provide is often helpful!

# Appendix K: Aide Coverage for Access Opportunity Document

| Event | ***Link Crew Outdoor Movie Night*** |
|---|---|
| Location | [redacted] |
| Time | (10/25) 6:20-8:45 |
| Staff #1 | [redacted] |
| Staff #2 | |
| Students | [redacted] |
| | [redacted] |
| | [redacted] |
| | [redacted] |
| | [redacted] |
| | [redacted] |

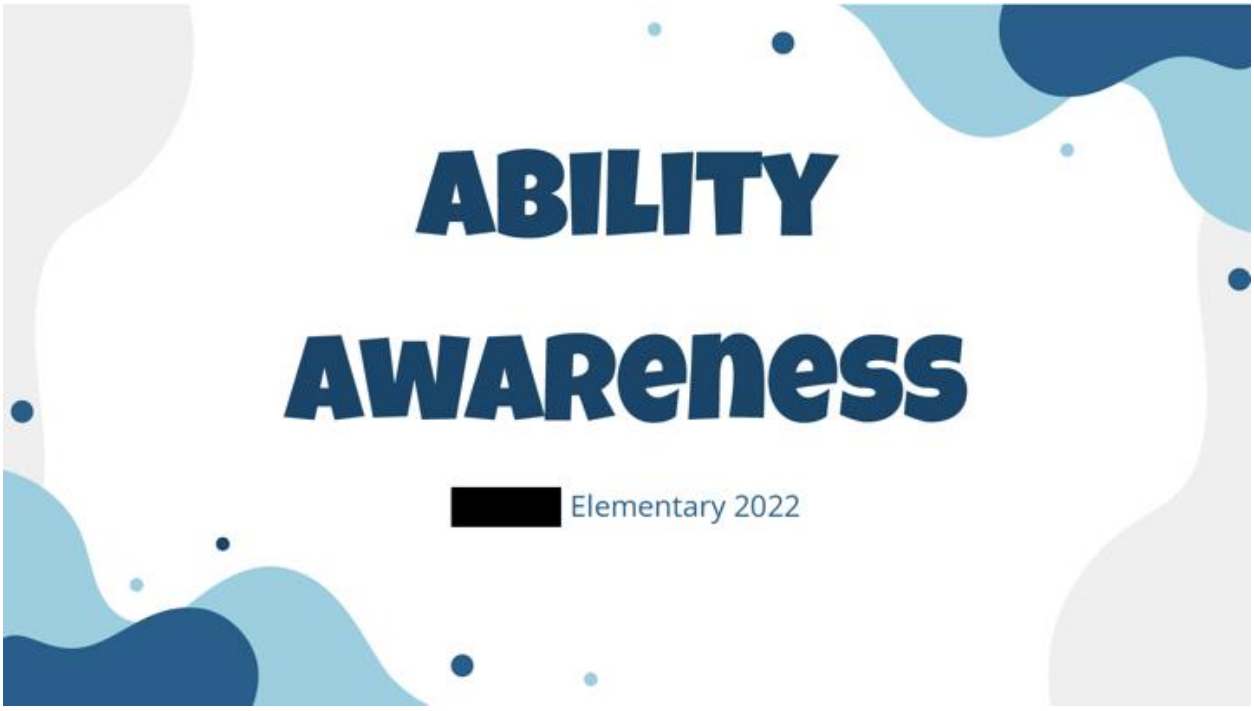
| Event | ***Homecoming Football Game*** |
|---|---|
| Location | [redacted] Stdium |
| Time | (10/27) 6:45-9:00 |
| Staff #1 | [redacted] |
| Staff #2 | [redacted] |
| Students | [redacted] |
| | [redacted] |
| | [redacted] |
| | [redacted] |
| | [redacted] |
| | [redacted] |

| Event | ***Homecoming Dance*** |
|---|---|
| Location | [redacted] High SChool |
| Time | (11/5) 6:45-9:30 |
| Staff #1 | [redacted] |
| Staff #2 | [redacted] |
| [redacted] | [redacted] |
| | [redacted] |
| | [redacted] |
| | [redacted] |
| | [redacted] |
| | [redacted] |

Fall 2023

| Period | Class | Time | Coverage | Notes | Staff | Position | Start | Break | Lunch | End |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Bus Drop Off** | | 8:15 | [redacted] (riding the bus) | APE- 1st Period (Coach O out there by 8:20/8:30) | [redacted] | 1:1 (NH) | Bus | 8:45-9 00 | 12 30-1:15 | Bus |
| 1 | APE | 8 30-9:27 | [redacted] take 15 minute break* | [redacted] restroom x4 @ end of period | [redacted] | Classroom Aide | 8:15 | X | 11:45-12:30 | 3:17 |
| 2 | English | 9 32- 10 29 | [redacted] (NH) [redacted] (class support) | Whole Group → Small Groups | **Vacancy** | Classroom Aide | | | | |
| 3 | DLS | 10:34- 11:31 | [redacted] (NH) [redacted] (class support) | [redacted] & [redacted] take girls to restroom | **Vacancy** | LAS2 Floater | | | | |
| 4 | Math | 11:36- 12:43 | [redacted] (NH) [redacted] take 45 minute lunch* | *need additional coverage here* | | | | | | |
| **Lunch** | | 12:43-1:13 | [redacted] (NH) [redacted] (class coverage) [redacted] 45 minute lunch* | *need additional coverage here* [redacted] + [redacted] support in restroom/changing | | | | | | |
| 5 | Science | 1:18-2:15 | [redacted] (NH) [redacted] (class support) | Fully Staffed (SDC aide comes in to support) | | | | | | |
| 6 | World History | 2 20-3:17 | [redacted] | *need additional support here* Currently bringing student to culinary class to provide staff support in electives | | | | | | |
| 6 | Culinary | 2 20-3:17 | [redacted] need support* | [redacted] switch with [redacted] @ 2:55 (NH Restroom) | | | | | | |
| 6 | Art | 2 20-3:17 | [redacted] | [redacted] take girls @ 3:05 Restroom | | | | | | |
| **Bus Pick Up** | | 3:15 | ***ALL*** | | | | | | | |

Appendix L: Ability Awareness Presentation



Appendix M: Understanding Disability Presentation

Appendix N: Inclusion Week Bingo Activity

SPREAD THE WORD INCLUSION
CHAMPIONS OF CHANGE

# Inclusion BINGO

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Invite someone new to play at recess | Share a way for your class to be more inclusive | Say "Hi" to 5 new people | Take the pledge to be inclusive | Tell a teacher how you are going to be inclusive |
| Sign the Spread the Word to End the Word banner | Offer to help someone who needs help | Have a conversation with someone new | Find out three things about someone you don't know | Participate in field day on Friday |
| Give someone a compliment | Tell someone something new you learned this week | **Free Space** | Write down your own act of kindness: _____ _____ | Write a thank you note to our guest speaker |
| Throw away someone else's trash at lunch | Tell someone why they are awesome | Write a kind note to a classmate | Introduce yourself to 3 new people (can be a teacher) | Ask someone new how their day is going |
| Share a way that our school can be more inclusive | Tell 5 people why inclusion matters | Smile at 5 people you don't know | Read a book about showing kindness | Sit next to someone new at lunch |

Appendix O: Inclusion Week Sentence Building Activity

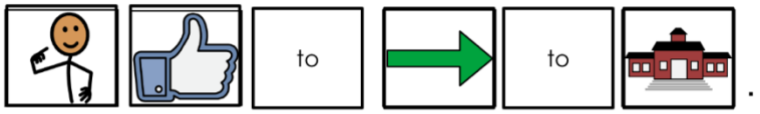
Sometimes people are not able to communicate with their mouth. Instead, they will use pictures to talk.

Match the pictures with the words to build sentences.

## BUILD THE SENTENCE

Cut out the pictures and glue them in the correct order.

1. I like to go to school.

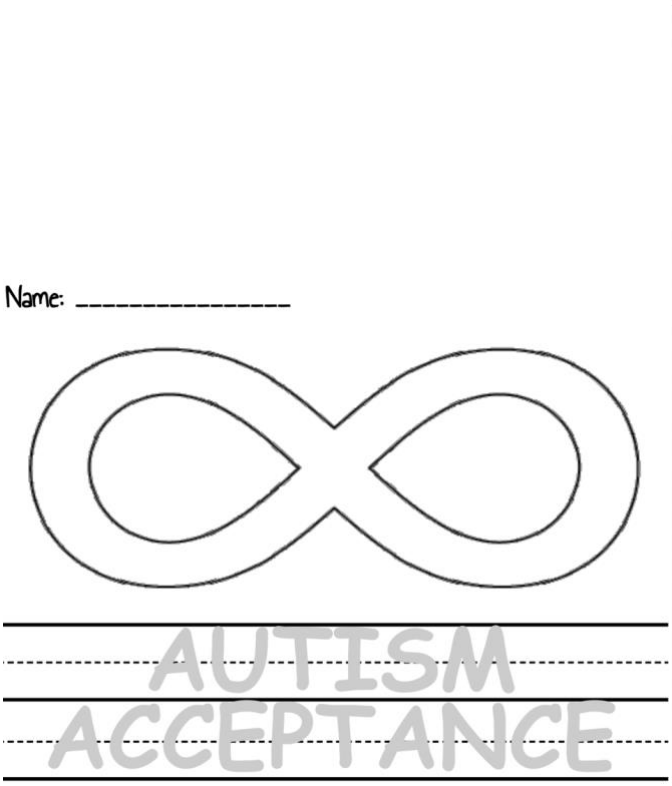


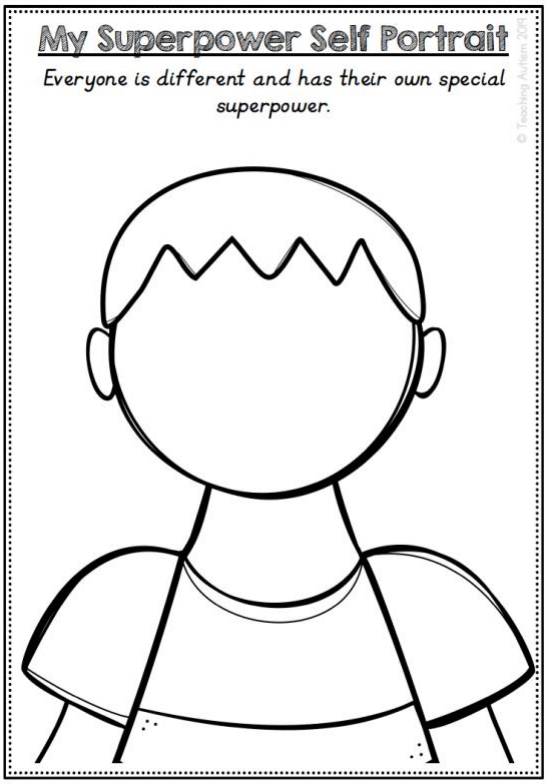

2. I play at the playground with my friends.


3. I go to the library and read books.

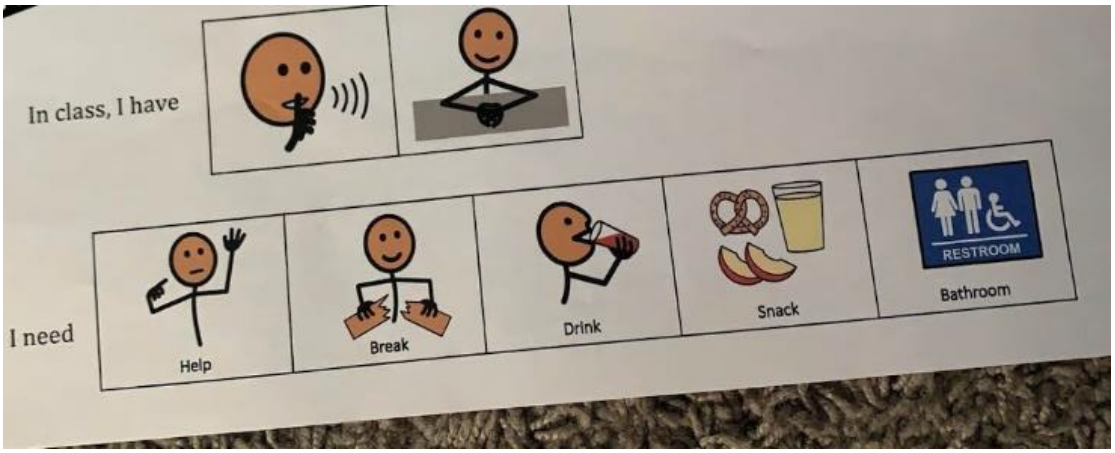
Appendix P: Inclusion Week Playground Communication Board

Appendix Q: Autism Acceptance Week Coloring Sheet and Activity Page



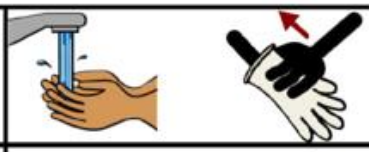
Appendix R: General Visual Supports



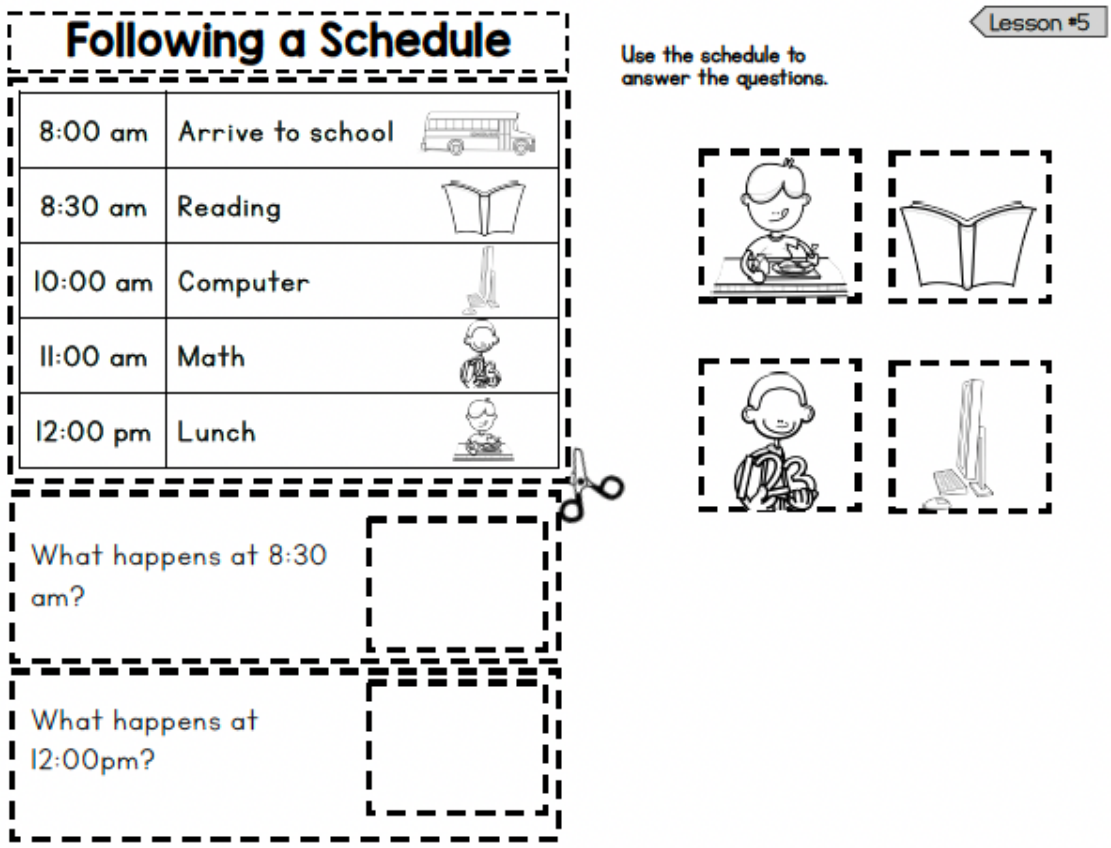

Appendix S: General Visual Supports

Appendix T: Coffee Cart Visual Directions

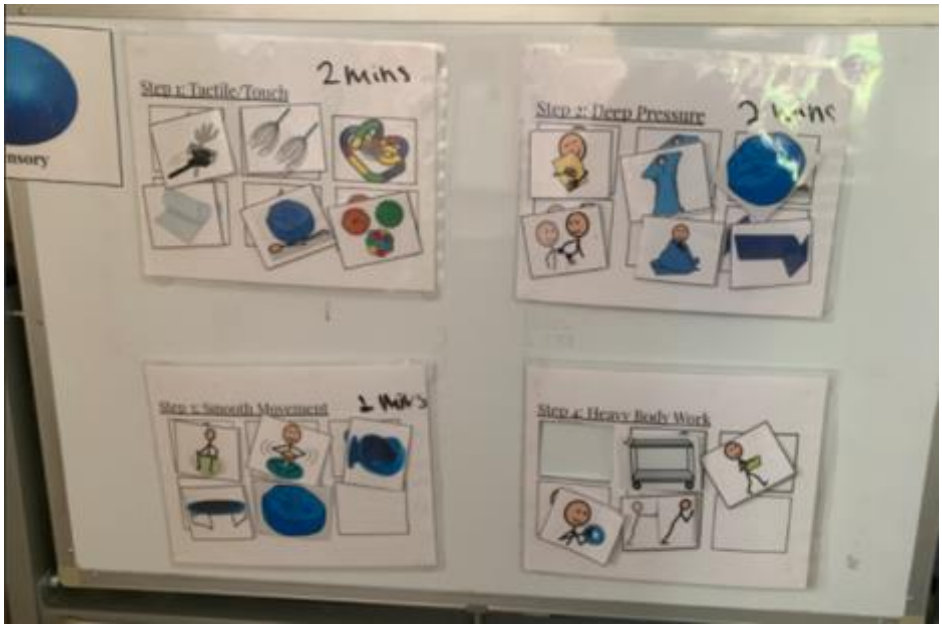
# HOT COFFEE

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Step 1:**<br><br>Wash Hands/ Put on Gloves |  | |
| **Step 2:**<br><br>Add 3 pumps of syrups into a hot coffee cup. |  | |
| **Step 3:**<br><br>Pour hot coffee into hot coffee cup. Fill to the line. |  | |

Appendix U: Interactive Frontloading Activity Worksheet



Appendix V: Sensory Choices



Appendix W: Modified Assignment Examples

Capstone Project

Name:

Grade:

Semester:

5 C's

Character & Compassion

Collaboration:

Communication

5 C's

Creativity

Critical Thinking

Reflection

How will you use what you learned?

CHOIR FINAL

January 2021

Name:
Period:

MY SONG CHOICE

| | |
|---|---|
| The song I chose to perform is: | |
| It is originally from/sung by: | |
| This song came out in the year: | |

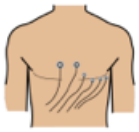
Heart and Nerve Function Lab Stations

Name _____

Station #1 - Testing Reflexes

Station #2 - Testing Spinal Nerve Function

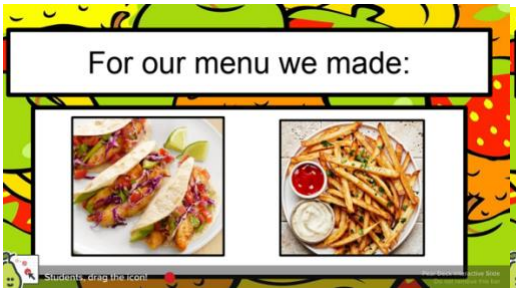
Station #3 - EKG - Heart Activity



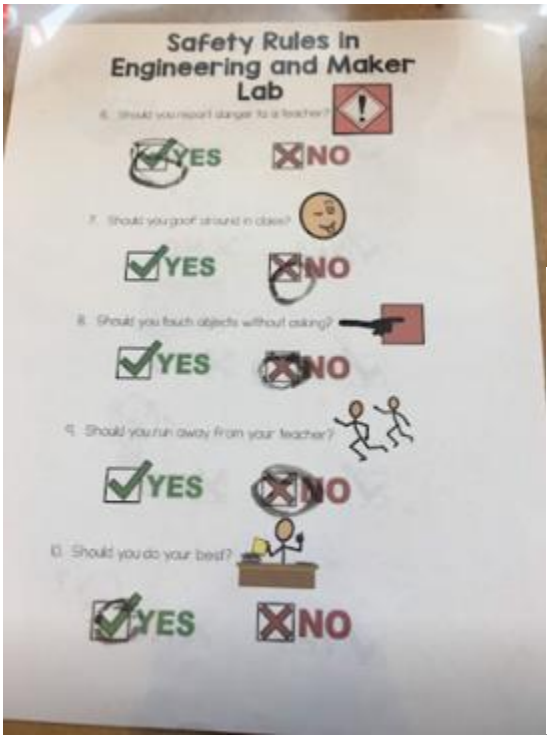
Station #4 - Pupil Light Reflex

Station #5 - Heart Sounds

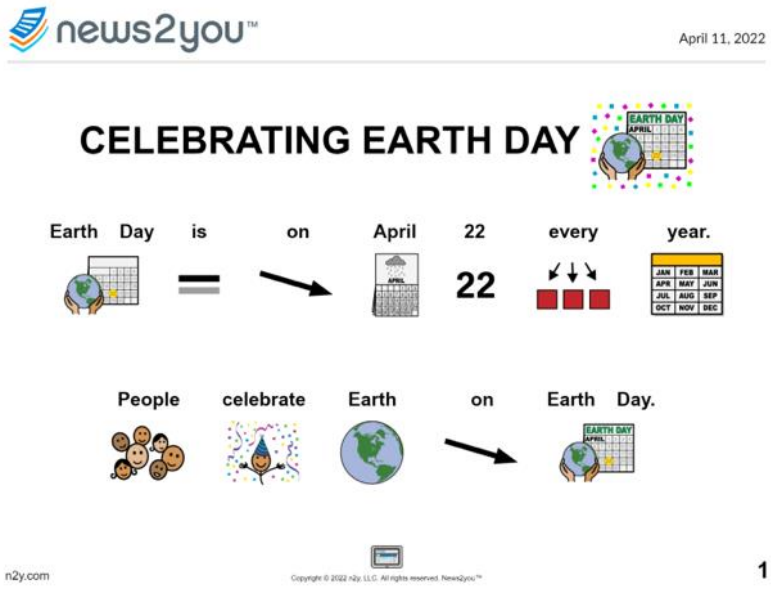
Station #6 - Blood Pressure







Safety Rules in Engineering and Maker Lab
YES
NO
YES
NO
YES
NO
YES
NO
YES
NO

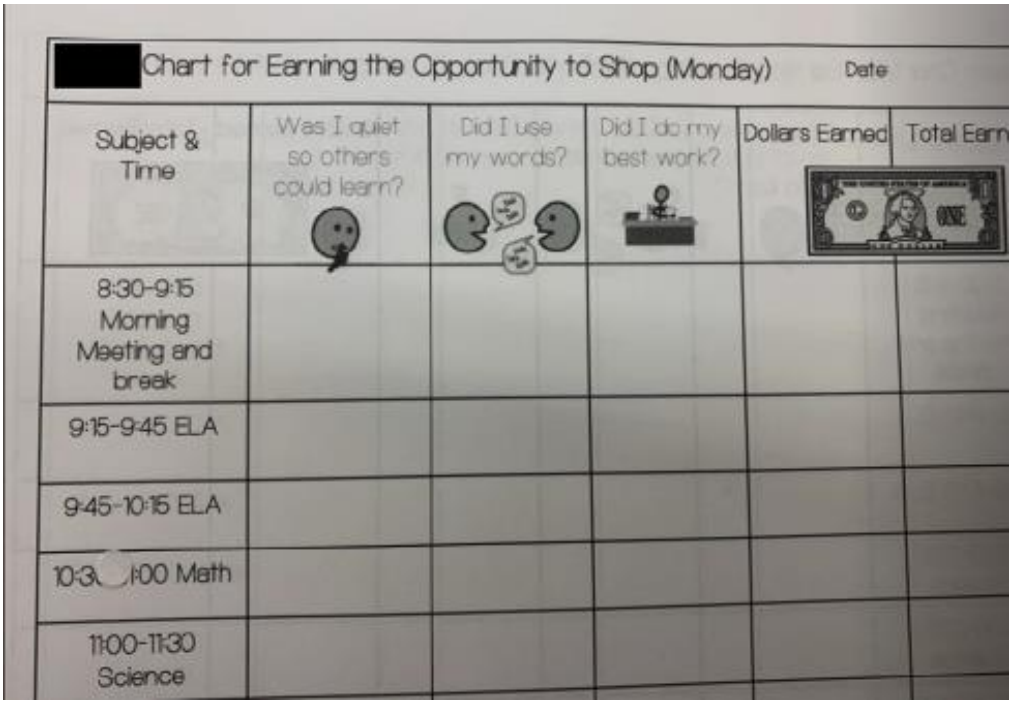

Water Color History
Cave Paintings
Ancient Egypt


news2you™
April 11, 2022
CELEBRATING EARTH DAY
Earth Day is on April 22 every year.
People celebrate Earth on Earth Day.
n2y.com
1

Appendix X: Student Behavior Contract Examples

**DATE:**

| | Class Topic<br>1= Fully prompted 3=1 prompt, but then independent 5=no prompts needed | Homework/Comments<br>Please include ABC data below as necessary and note the activity she was doing when it occurred |
|---|---|---|
| **1**<br>Ceramics | **On task** 1 2 3 4 5<br>**Making Safe Decisions** 1 2 3 4 5<br>**Stressed? YES NO** **Strategy Used:** | |
| **2**<br>dance | **On task** 1 2 3 4 5<br>**Making Safe Decisions** 1 2 3 4 5<br>**Stressed? YES NO** **Strategy Used:** | |
| **3**<br>draw | **On task** 1 2 3 4 5<br>**Making Safe Decisions** 1 2 3 4 5<br>**Stressed? YES NO** **Strategy Used:** | |
| **4**<br>Eng 10 | **On task** 1 2 3 4 5<br>**Making Safe Decisions** 1 2 3 4 5<br>**Stressed? YES NO** **Strategy Used:** | |



Appendix Y: Token Chart and Reinforcement Choice Board Examples