

Georgia State University

ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University

Middle and Secondary Education Dissertations Department of Middle and Secondary Education

1-8-2021

Stories from the Bridge: Special Education Teachers' Experiences with Inclusion and High-Quality Instruction for Students with Severe Disabilities

Rebecca L. Eswine
Georgia State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/mse_diss

Recommended Citation

Eswine, Rebecca L., "Stories from the Bridge: Special Education Teachers' Experiences with Inclusion and High-Quality Instruction for Students with Severe Disabilities." Dissertation, Georgia State University, 2021. doi: <https://doi.org/10.57709/20497556>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Middle and Secondary Education at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Middle and Secondary Education Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gsu.edu.

ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, STORIES FROM THE BRIDGE: SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES WITH INCLUSION AND HIGH-QUALITY INSTRUCTION FOR STUDENTS WITH SEVERE DISABILITIES, by REBECCA ESWINE, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Education, in the College of Education & Human Development, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chairperson, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty.

DaShaunda Patterson, Ph.D.
Committee Chair

Diane Truscott, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Lauren Boden, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Date

Gertrude Tinker Sachs, Ph.D.
Chairperson, Department of Middle &
Secondary Education

Paul A. Alberto, Ph.D.
Dean, College of Education &
Human Development

AUTHOR'S STATEMENT

By presenting this dissertation as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the advanced degree from Georgia State University, I agree that the library of Georgia State University shall make it available for inspection and circulation in accordance with its regulations governing materials of this type. I agree that permission to quote, to copy from, or to publish this dissertation may be granted by the professor under whose direction it was written, by the College of Education & Human Development's Director of Graduate Studies, or by me. Such quoting, copying, or publishing must be solely for scholarly purposes and will not involve potential financial gain. It is understood that any copying from or publication of this dissertation which involves potential financial gain will not be allowed without my written permission.

REBECCA ESWINE

NOTICE TO BORROWERS

All dissertations deposited in the Georgia State University library must be used in accordance with the stipulations prescribed by the author in the preceding statement. The author of this dissertation is:

Rebecca Lane Eswine
Middle and Secondary Education
College of Education & Human Development
Georgia State University

The director of this dissertation is:

Dr. DaShaunda Patterson
Department of Learning Sciences
College of Education & Human Development
Georgia State University
Atlanta, GA 30303

CURRICULUM VITAE

Rebecca L. Eswine

Department of Middle & Secondary Education
College of Education and Human Development
Georgia State University
Atlanta, GA 30303

EDUCATION:

Ed.D.	2020	Georgia State University Curriculum and Instruction Language and Literacy
Masters Degree	2014	Georgia State University Behavior/Learning Disabilities
Bachelors Degree	2012	Georgia State University Psychology

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

2017-present	Moderate Intellectual Disabilities Special Education Teacher *Watt County School District
2014-2017	Mild Intellectual Disabilities Special Education Teacher *Watt County School District
2013-2014	Interrelated Special Education Teacher *Watt County School District

PRESENTATIONS AND PUBLICATIONS:

Eswine, R.L. (2021, January). *“The opportunity is a resource:” Special education teachers experiences with inclusion* [Conference session]. DADD International Conference on Autism, Intellectual Disability and Developmental Disabilities, 22nd Annual Conference, Clearwater Beach, FL.

Eswine, R. L. (2018, December). *Writing without pencils in the MOID elementary classroom* [Conference session]. Georgia Assistive Technology in Education Seminar, 7th Annual Conference, Atlanta, GA.

Patterson, D., Price, N., Veazie, M., Magaro, T., & Lane, R. (2018, September). *Bolstering the special education workforce through a paraprofessional to teacher residency model* [Conference session]. Professional Development Schools Southeastern Region Vision for Education, 2nd Annual Conference, Columbia, SC. (peer-reviewed)

PROFESSIONAL SOCIETIES AND ORGANIZATIONS

2018-present

Council for Exceptional Children

2018-present

Division on Autism and Developmental Disabilities

STORIES FROM THE BRIDGE: SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES
WITH INCLUSION AND HIGH-QUALITY INSTRUCTION FOR STUDENTS WITH
SEVERE DISABILITIES

by

REBECCA ESWINE

Under the Direction of Dr. DaShaunda Patterson

ABSTRACT

Students with severe disabilities started attending public schools when the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 was signed into law by President Gerald Ford. Students with severe disabilities had a place in the public-school settings; however, that place was a separate classroom with separate learning objectives than their general education peers. In the 1980s and 1990s, parents and advocates called for opportunities for students with severe disabilities and their peers to interact in the general education setting to benefit the social development of the students; however, Bach (2017) argues that overall not much has changed with the social acceptance and inclusivity of people with severe disabilities. The purpose of this study was to examine the ways that three special education teachers engaged in educationally inclusive practices and high-quality instruction, as well as how they reflected and perceived these processes. The study used Gloria Anzaldúa's conceptualization of the *nepantlera* and *nos/otras* to frame my inquiry of the special education teachers within their school contexts. The study utilized a narrative inquiry methodology for data collection and analysis (Clandinin & Connelly,

2000). From the analysis, I identified three major themes: (1) Special education teachers use high-quality instruction to engage their students in real-world learning experiences; (2) Special education teachers use high-quality instruction to challenge perceptions others have about what their students are capable of achieving; and (3) Special education teachers encounter barriers when attempting to sustain inclusive opportunities. Findings suggest that the self-contained class did not hold the same privilege as the general education class, but the self-contained class was a space where the students with severe disabilities were accommodated. The teachers' high-quality instruction helped their students access their community and develop the communication and social skills to engage with others, and their messaging outward into the community of their students' accomplishments helped others consider their students as more than just a disability category.

INDEX WORDS: Special education teachers, Students with severe disabilities, High-quality instruction, Inclusion, Narrative inquiry

STORIES FROM THE BRIDGE: SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES
WITH INCLUSION AND HIGH-QUALITY INSTRUCTION FOR STUDENTS WITH
SEVERE DISABILITIES

by

REBECCA ESWINE

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the

Degree of

Doctor of Education

in

Curriculum and Instruction

in

Middle and Secondary Education

in

the College of Education & Human Development

Georgia State University

Atlanta, GA
2020

Copyright by
Rebecca L. Eswine
2020

DEDICATION

I humbly dedicate this dissertation to Erin, Taylor, Osman, Wilson, Jennifer, Man-Man, Jordan, Jessica, Hunter, Bryan, Robert, Caleb, Little Matthew and Big Matthew, Blake, Amanda, Charlie, Seanie, Evan, Sheldon, Maggie, Anderson, Will, Parker, Andrew, Patrick, Justin, Michael, and so many other souls who have taught me what it means to be a friend. I learned from you what (dis)ability means far better than anything I ever read in a textbook, and it is because of you that I hold this work so close to my heart. I am forever grateful for how each of you have impacted my life and could never put into words the love in my heart for you; so instead, here are some words that I can say: goofy goober, coleslaw, school bunny, smooth and fast, and pre-poop. Thank you for all of the dances, lake days, and dates to Waffle House. Thank you for including me into your lives and accepting me as your friend. It is because of you that I am me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A dissertation is not a solitary journey. I am forever grateful for the people whose wisdom and encouragement have guided me along the way. First and foremost, I would like to express my appreciation for my chair, *Dr. Patterson*. You were the one who suggested that I consider this Ed.D program, and your encouragement and guidance throughout this process has meant the world to me. *Dr. Truscott*, thank you for your continual feedback and guidance through this process of learning to be a researcher. *Dr. Boden*, thank you for joining my team when I needed you the most and offering your support.

I would also like to extend my appreciation to so many of the other professors at Georgia State whose classes challenged my way of thinking and helped me grow in my criticality and identity as a researcher. *Dr. Sullivan*, thank you for your tireless work to ensure that our EDD program is successful. You demystified the experience of being a doctoral student and were always willing to talk through any questions or challenges. *Dr. Junor Clarke, Dr. Muhammad, Dr. Behizadeh, Dr. Fournillier, Dr. Fisher-Ari, Dr. Zoss and many others*, thank you for allowing me the space to explore topics that directly related to my areas of interest in special education, even when the assignment called for something more related to the mainstream.

One of my very first teachers was my grandmother. Born in the 1920's, she never had the opportunity to finish high school. While she passed away just a few months before I started this doctoral program, I carried her unwaveringly high expectations for me throughout this process. Thank you, *Nana* for always believing in me. You made me want to do exceptional things. Thank you to my *parents and family* for understanding that I needed to do dinner on Saturday because I finish some writing on Sunday. You raised me to be independent and strong, and you

never clipped my wings. You let me choose my own path and never stopped supporting me along the way.

“Can I read you something?” “Always”—*Josh*, I love you so dearly and could not imagine my life without you. Throughout this journey, you listened to me when I needed to read my rough drafts aloud; you turned the TV down when I was reading something especially technical; you made sure that there were groceries in our house and the cats were entertained; but most importantly, you believed in me. Thank you for being my husband and supporting me, not just during this doctoral journey, but always.

There are so many others who kept me sane and encouraged throughout this process. My dear *friends, colleagues, and fellow doctoral students*, I appreciate your listening ears when I was stuck and your jokes when I needed a break. I am so grateful for *my students*, past, present, and future who remind me that I do this work so that they can have the best teacher possible.

Table of Contents

LIST OF FIGURES	vii
1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
Key Terms.....	6
Severe Disabilities	7
Educational Inclusion	8
High-Quality Instruction.....	9
Purpose.....	11
Research Question	11
Significance of the Study	11
Epistemology	12
Conceptual Framework.....	13
Nepantlera	14
Special Education Teachers as Nepantlera.....	15
Nos/otras and New Tribalism	16
Nos/otras in School Communities.....	17
Organization of Remaining Chapters	18
2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	19
History of Intellectual Disabilities	19
Middle Ages to Enlightenment: Fifth to Eighteenth Centuries	20
The Modern Era: Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries.....	22
Civil Rights from 1954 to 1975	25
History of Special Education for Students with Intellectual Disabilities.....	28
Curriculum for Students with Intellectual Disabilities	29
Self-Contained Classes for Students with Severe Disabilities.....	34
Perspectives of Special Education Teachers.....	34
Perceptions of Self-Contained Classrooms and Special Education Teachers	36
Quasi-Experimental Research Pertaining to Teaching Strategies	37

Inclusion for Students with Severe Disabilities	38
Formal Inclusion Programs	40
Collaboration in Inclusive Settings.....	43
Quality Education Programs for Students with Severe Disabilities	45
3 METHODOLOGY	49
Research Design	49
Context.....	50
Participants.....	51
Subjectivity and Positionality	59
Subjectivities.....	59
Positionality	62
Methods of Data Collection.....	64
Narrative Beginnings and Researcher Journal.....	64
Initial Conversation	65
Interviews.....	66
Transcription.....	67
Observations.....	68
Collection of Documents and Artifacts	69
Methods of Data Analysis.....	72
Ethical Considerations.....	77
Delimitations.....	77
Limitations.....	78
Trustworthiness.....	79
4 FINDINGS	81
Theme One: Instruction to Engage Students in Real-World Learning Experiences	82
Miss Honey’s Instruction	83
Lindsey’s Instruction	86
Michelle’s Instruction.....	89

My Instructional Connection	92
Building Nos/otras Through Instruction	94
Theme Two: Instruction to Challenge Perceptions of Others	95
Michelle’s Advocacy	96
Lindsey’s Advocacy	99
Miss Honey’s Advocacy	102
My Advocacy Connection.....	104
Nepantlera Advocacy.....	106
Theme Three: Barriers to Sustaining Inclusive Opportunities	107
Lindsey’s Inclusion	109
Michelle’s Inclusion	111
Miss Honey’s Inclusion.....	113
My Inclusion Connection	116
Nepantlera as Advocates of Inclusion	120
5 DISCUSSION	122
Anzaldúa’s Shift.....	122
Privilege of the General Education and Stereotypes of Self-Contained Spaces.....	125
Accessible but Not Accommodating.....	128
Reimagining Inclusion as More Than an IEP Segment	130
Suggestions for Future Research.....	133
Final Thoughts	134
Failed CBI and Santa.....	136
REFERENCES	138
APPENDICES	152

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Model of Theme One.....	83
Figure 2. Miss Honey’s Class Purchases Chrips from Concession Stand at School Assembly...85	
Figure 3. Coffee Cart for Weekly Coffee Shop at Lindsey’s School	87
Figure 4. Model of Theme Two.....	96
Figure 5. Michelle’s Representation of How Inclusion is Experienced by Her Students	97
Figure 6. Garden Bed Used by Lindsey’s Class	101
Figure 7. Michelle’s Vision of Nosotras.....	107
Figure 8. Model of Theme Three.....	109

1 INTRODUCTION

I walked into a special education classroom for students with severe and profound intellectual disabilities for the first time in 2005 when I was a sophomore in high school. I had no idea what to expect, having little experience or knowledge of students with disabilities or the responsibilities of a special education teacher. I saw wheelchairs, a stockpile of adult-size diapers, changing tables, and feeding equipment. I heard nonverbal students making vocalizations, and special education teachers seeming to know exactly what those vocalizations meant and responding to those needs; but most importantly, I sensed the love and mutual respect that the teachers and students shared. I knew that the students in this classroom were deeply cared for by the special education teachers and paraprofessionals, and I knew that I wanted to provide that same care and dedication as a special education teacher one day.

My journey into special education was full of hands-on experiences. I volunteered in the severe/profound special education classroom my sophomore, junior, and senior years of high school. I ran a camp for multiple summers for children and young adults with a wide range of disabilities. I coached swimming, bowling, soccer, and track for the Special Olympics, and I also provided respite care for adults with severe disabilities. I started teaching in 2013 in an inclusion setting for students with high-incidence disabilities, such as learning and behavioral disorders. In 2017, I moved into a position as a low-incidence special education teacher for students with moderate intellectual disabilities and autism. I would be lying if I said it was a position I felt completely prepared to take on, even in spite of over a decade worth of experiences. The teacher who had the class before me was a veteran teacher with over 30 years of experience. She resigned, just a few years away from retirement with full benefits, because she was burnt out, and I took over the class somewhat reluctantly knowing how challenging the work could be. At the same time, I began my doctoral journey and immediately considered a dissertation topic

about burnout and special education teacher attrition. I read, researched, and became immensely frustrated by the staggering statistics surrounding rates of special education teachers leaving (Kaff, 2004; Sutchter, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). Discouraged by what seemed like a complex and gloomy problem (Billingsley, 2007; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008), I wanted instead to focus my research on what teachers and researchers were doing that was sustaining the field (Billingsley, 2004) and promoting positive student outcomes (Howell & Gengel, 2005). I started researching topics surrounding instructional methods (Downing, 2005), teacher expertise (Ruppar, Roberts, & Olson, 2017; Stough & Palmer, 2003), and inclusion (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007; Osgood, 2005). With every journal article and book chapter I read, I reflected on my own classroom, my pedagogical beliefs, and my implementation of certain instructional and behavioral practices over others. I thought about my role as an advocate for my students and recalled conversations with parents about their worries and fears about their children's lives and futures. I also saw the progress my students were making in academics, behavior, communication, and life skills. They mastered holding a marker and forming the letters to write their names as well as composing writing using sentence frames (Pennington, Flick, & Smith-Wehr, 2018). They started recognizing sight words and growing in their academic and social vocabulary, and they learned how to use concrete manipulatives to solve addition and subtraction problems (Bouck, Park, & Nickell, 2017). I saw many parallels between what the research was reporting students with moderate intellectual disabilities could achieve academically with what my students were doing in class as well as parallels between my instructional decisions and the literature surrounding models for effective instruction (Pennington, Courtade, Ault, & Delano, 2016).

One point of frustration for me, as I negotiated the literature and my own practices in the classroom, was the research surrounding educational inclusion. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 mandates that students with disabilities receive the maximum amount of their education in a general education setting as possible but also acknowledges that at times the severity of a student's disability means that the student requires an intensity of services that cannot be provided in a general education classroom setting. I interpret this part of the law to mean that a classroom like mine in public school settings allow students with severe disabilities to go between a self-contained special education class and general education setting when the individualized educational program (IEP) team considers the settings to be most appropriate. Even though my students receive most of their academic instruction in a self-contained classroom, I continually encourage them to be active members of the school community. They check out books in the media center, attend school assemblies and field trips with their peers, and eat lunch in the cafeteria like any other class of students; however, as I read literature around inclusion (Kliwer, Biklen, & Petersen, 2015; Ryndak, Jackson, & Billingsley, 2000), I could not help feeling like I was not doing enough for my students because they were not taught full-time in a general education classroom setting. I also saw the debate specifically between these two classroom placements as an oversimplification of a much larger issue about the place in society for people with disabilities (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012).

Students with severe disabilities started attending public schools when the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 was signed into law by President Gerald Ford. Students with severe disabilities had a place in the public-school setting; however, that place was a separate classroom with separate learning objectives than their general education peers. Maynard Reynolds (1962) proposed a pyramid-like hierarchy of special education programs that focused

on the setting in which the special education services were delivered. The hierarchy included a regular education classroom as the base where the majority of students identified as requiring special education services received their services. Full-time special class was located in the middle of the pyramid for students Reynolds classified as “trainable retarded children and many of the multiply handicapped” that required extensive support (p. 369). This classification would include students identified in the present-day as having severe disabilities who are still typically taught in a self-contained classroom setting by a special education teacher (Polloway, Bouck, & Yang, 2019). The pyramid was used widely after the adoption of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 to help schools design special education programs in public schools and “solidified in the minds of many the need for various segregated settings [...] that would serve as the ‘least restrictive environment’ for those exceptional children whose presence in the regular classroom was deemed too problematic” (Osgood, 2005, pp. 119-120). Osgood further argued that the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 strengthened the importance of categorical disabilities, such as behavior disorders and intellectual disabilities, as well as the notion that students with disabilities required specialized instruction that could only be delivered by a special education teacher. For as long as students with severe disabilities have received their education in a public-school setting, it has been assumed that a separate classroom apart from their peers was an appropriate, least restrictive placement. Only recently have those opinions started to shift toward a focus on greater access to the general education setting and learning academic curriculum alongside general education peers (Downing, 2010; Kliever et al., 2015; Wehmeyer, Shogren, & Brown, 2017).

In the 1980s and 1990s, parents and advocates called for opportunities for students with severe disabilities and their peers to interact in the general education setting to benefit the social

development of the students (Downing, 2010; Wehmeyer et al., 2017). The initial movement for mainstreaming, or “including students with disabilities in select, nonacademic courses” (Wehmeyer et al., 2017, p. 533) was the foundation for future inclusive educational opportunities for students with severe disabilities. With the adoption of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004, and Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, students with severe disabilities are closer to full educational inclusion than they historically ever have been; and yet, inclusion “in general education classrooms is uneven at best and successful implementation rests heavily on individual teams” at local schools (Downing, 2010, p. 5). The issue is not simply that students with severe disabilities are taught in self-contained or general education classrooms; but instead, people’s general apathy towards inclusion of people with disabilities perpetuates the opportunities for inequitable educational experiences for these students in schools. Teachers must ensure that the learning environment is accessible and engaging for all students, (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012) and no matter the setting students with severe disabilities is, that they are actively engaged in the learning taking place (Downing, 2005). Baglieri and Shapiro (2012) argue that opportunities for educational inclusion and teachers’ instructional decisions can serve as ways to disrupt “stereotypic characterizations of disability” (p. 29) and foster greater equitable outcomes for students with severe disabilities.

When researchers and advocates criticize self-contained special education classrooms, they often state that the classrooms serve to segregate and discriminate against students with disabilities on the basis of their disability (Erevelles, 2005). Researchers and scholars of critical disability theory and the social model of disability frames the debate between inclusion and self-contained classrooms as a social justice issue because when students are removed from the general education setting, they are segregated on the basis of their disability (Bach, 2017;

Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012). While I agree that self-contained special education classrooms have the potential to be spaces of segregation, I argue that the same case could be made for any classroom where students are not actively engaged or welcomed because of some perceived difference. Osgood (2008) states that “throughout our nation’s history, children identified as disabled in the United States have lived lives reflecting a remarkable ambivalence toward their place in American society” (p. xiii). Simply moving students with severe disabilities from one classroom setting to another will not change the mindset and beliefs that people from the mainstream have about who these students are and what they are capable of achieving. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe these longstanding beliefs about a group of people as a grand narrative. Bach (2017) argues that for greater equity and inclusion, people from the mainstream are needed to advocate for systematic change and support equitable practices. Special education teachers are capable of being these advocates for change because they are the ones who can counter the grand narrative about students with severe disabilities. The teachers can share their experiences and stories that may run counter to assumed beliefs in order to advocate for their students. Through my research study, I want to understand how teachers provide high-quality instruction and promote educational inclusion within their school communities. In the next section, I define three important concepts for this study: severe disabilities, educational inclusion, and high-quality education.

Key Terms

My study focuses on special education teachers who teach students with severe disabilities. I consider how these special education teachers create educationally inclusive opportunities and provide high-quality instruction for their students. In this section, I use literature from the field to define the terms severe disabilities, educational inclusion, and high-quality instruction.

Severe Disabilities

There are numerous terms used in academic writing to refer to people who are considered to have severe disabilities. In 1973, the American Association on Mental Deficiency adopted the position that a person with an intelligence quotient (IQ) below 70 was considered intellectually disabled (Winzer, 2009). Harris (2006) states that an intellectual disability is not a static disorder; but instead it comprises “a heterogeneous group of conditions that range from genetic and metabolic disorders to functional changes in cognition following trauma to the nervous system” at birth or later in life (p. 12). Within the umbrella of intellectual disability are the categories of mild, moderate, severe, and profound. Mild intellectual disability comprises an IQ range between 50 to 70 and is often categorized with high-incidence disabilities such as learning disability and behavioral disability (Winzer, 2009). Low-incidence disabilities, or severe disabilities, occur less frequently in a population and include the moderate, severe, and profound intellectual disability classifications. Osgood (2005) states that a moderate intellectual disability is generally within the IQ range of 40-60 while severe and profound intellectual disabilities are below 40. To be diagnosed with an intellectual disability, a person must have impaired adaptive behaviors, such as motor abilities or independent self-care skills (Scheerenberger, 1987). Some researchers refer to people with these intellectual classifications as having significant cognitive disabilities (Roberts & Leko, 2013) while researchers in the United Kingdom use the term severe learning difficulty (Lawson & Jones, 2018). Courtade, Spooner, Browder, and Jimenez (2012) note that people with severe disabilities may have physical disabilities, sensory deficits, or autism. Most students with severe disabilities are taught in self-contained classrooms by a special education teacher (Polloway et al., 2019). In chapter two, I describe the history of people with intellectual disabilities that includes mild intellectual disabilities. Later in the chapter, I describe the more recent trends in research and educational experiences, and I use the term severe disabilities to

specifically consider the students who have low-incidence disabilities, not including mild intellectual disabilities.

Educational Inclusion

Wehmeyer et al. (2017) define educational inclusion as taking place when “students with disabilities are educated in the same schools and the same classrooms as their peers without disabilities, with the specially designed instruction and other accommodations they need to be successful” (p. 528). This definition describes a general education classroom setting where all students are learning and supported by teachers and support personnel. In Reynold’s (1962) pyramid of special education programs, the general education classroom was considered the least restrictive environment for most students but not necessarily the most appropriate learning environment for students with severe disabilities.

Ryndak et al. (2000) used results from a questionnaire to develop a definition of inclusion for students with moderate and severe intellectual disabilities. They describe inclusion as placement in natural settings such as an age-appropriate general education classroom with nondisabled peers. Additionally, the participants conceptualized inclusion as an environment where students learn together but students with disabilities have more individual learning goals. The setting includes modifications and supports for diverse learners, but all of the students have a sense of belonging within the school community, and teachers and support personnel work collaboratively.

Although the location is an important aspect of the definition of inclusion, June Downing (2005) argues that inclusive educational opportunities should be defined as more than just the physical presence of students with severe disabilities in one classroom setting or another, but that “the goal of inclusive education is to ensure that all students are learning and being challenged to learn to their maximum potential” (p. 38). A general education setting can be a space where

students with severe disabilities learn to their maximum potential (Courtade et al., 2012; Obiakor, 2011; Petersen, 2016) because it is assumed that students in this setting are already held to these high academic expectations, as opposed to a self-contained class that has historically been less likely to be a site where academic instruction takes place (Kliewer et al., 2015; Scheerenberger, 1987; Winzer, 2009). Downing (2005) states that meaningful educational opportunities and educational inclusion are essentially one in the same because inclusion describes the active involvement and engagement of the students in the learning process through high-quality instruction. While she advocates for greater access to the general education setting, she also acknowledges that the setting of instruction, whether general education or self-contained, does not guarantee the student is an actively engaged member of the classroom.

High-Quality Instruction

As Downing (2005) argued, the ultimate goal for students with severe disabilities should be not just be their physical presence in a general education setting; but instead, the priority should be on the students' active engagement in learning to their greatest potential. She acknowledges that some students with severe disabilities may not be able to fully master the academic standards as they are written, but teachers can modify the standards and provide high-quality, systematic instruction so that the students are engaging in the same academic topics as their peers. Pennington et al. (2016) describe the five features of a high-quality educational program for students with severe disabilities. These five features include ensuring a safe and respectful environment for students; focusing on communication skills through instruction; providing a broad and age-appropriate curriculum; delivering instruction that is intensive, explicit, and systematic; and continually evaluating student progress and instructional practices. The framework does not mandate a placement for instruction; but instead, it challenges the special education teacher and other school personnel to consider how their instructional choices

are creating meaningful opportunities for students with severe disabilities to learn and grow no matter where the instruction is taking place.

Saunders, Spooner, Browder, Wakeman, and Lee (2013) developed a six-step process for developing effective and high-quality English language arts (ELA) instruction for students with severe disabilities. The steps include selecting a text and target content standards, adapting the text using shortened passages and more visual supports, developing lessons that utilize systematic teaching practices, and incorporating a writing composition activity for the student to respond and engage with the text through writing. The approach ensures that the curricular materials are modified to be more accessible and engaging to the students but still aligned to the grade-level academic standards. Teachers are able to provide high-quality education to their students with severe disabilities through their instructional choices that are responsive to their students' needs and aligned to the grade-level academic standards.

The models proposed by Pennington et al. (2016) and Saunders et al. (2013) show that high-quality instruction is not context dependent, but it does require a skilled teacher who has both knowledge of the academic curriculum and understanding of the students in the classroom. McLesky and Billingsley (2008) argue that a qualified special education teacher is the greatest determinant of student success because that teacher is prepared to meet the needs of the students, maintain high-expectations, and utilize systematic and responsive teaching practices. Downing (2005) argues that when instruction is of high-quality, it is “engaging, entertaining, meaningful, and fun” so that the students with severe disabilities are drawn into the learning experiences (p. 60). Special education teachers providing this high-quality instruction understand their students' interests and abilities and are able to negotiate curricular standards and instructional materials while supporting their students' academic needs.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the ways that low-incidence special education teachers engage in educationally inclusive practices and high-quality instruction, as well as how they reflect and perceive these processes.

Research Question

The study will address the following research questions: What are the perspectives and experiences of K-12 special education teachers on the process of creating educationally inclusive opportunities for their students with severe disabilities? What are the perspectives and experiences of K-12 special education teachers on the process of creating high-quality instruction for their students with severe disabilities?

Significance of the Study

Special education teachers are an underrepresented group in educational research. Prior research has explored the perspectives and dispositions of low-incidence special education teachers (Howell & Gengel, 2005; Petersen, 2016; Ruppert et al., 2017), and a few studies specifically look at these teachers decision-making processes (Lawson & Jones, 2018; Timberlake, 2014). My study offers something new to the literature by considering the connection between educational inclusion and high-quality instruction, and how the special education teachers foster educational outcomes for their students. In the next section, I describe my epistemology and conceptual framework that inform my study. By using the framework of the *nos/otras* and the *nepantlera* from Gloria Anzaldúa, I demonstrate that researchers can understand how the special education teacher can be an agent of change to advocate for students with severe disabilities within the school community.

Epistemology

Epistemology is defined as the “relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known” (Guba & Lincoln, 2004, p. 21). The knower can approach knowledge from an objective, constructive, or subjective epistemological stance, and that stance informs how the knower conceptualizes the world (Crotty, 1998). Crotty describes epistemologies on a continuum from objective to subjective, with constructive in the middle. A person viewing knowledge from an objective stance believes that knowledge can exist outside of a person’s conscious awareness while a subjectivist views meaning as being “imposed on the object by the subject” (p. 9). Constructivism rejects either polarities and instead views knowledge as an interplay between a subject and an object. Crotty also distinguishes between constructivism and constructionism by describing constructivism as focusing on the individual person’s process of constructing meaning while constructionism puts a greater emphasis on how a collective group generates meaning. I believe that people construct meaning based on their interactions, culture, prior experiences, and histories. I approach knowledge from a constructionist epistemological stance, so for this study, I will recruit multiple participants to co-construct their collective understanding of inclusive and high-quality educational experiences for their students with severe disabilities.

Michael Patton (2015) describes a paradigm as a particular way of thinking about the world. I approach my worldview from a critical theory research paradigm where knowledge is “a series of structural/historical insights that will be transformed as time passes. Transformation occurs when ignorance and misapprehensions give way to more informed insights” (Guba & Lincoln, 2004, p. 31). As I describe in chapter two, children and adults with severe disabilities have been relegated to a status of second-class citizens dating as far back as the medieval period (Mutua, Siders, & Bakken, 2011). Although advocates have pushed for the mainstreaming and

inclusion of children with severe disabilities into general education classrooms for decades, Baglieri and Shapiro (2012) argue that “integrating children with disabilities into general education environments without pedagogically dealing with attitudes is meaningless and, in some cases, increases negative attitudes” (p. 7). Inclusion without social acceptance, according to Baglieri and Shapiro, can be just as damaging as maintaining the status quo. Crotty (1998) argued that the critical paradigm allows researchers to do more than expose injustices because it creates a space for them to “discard false consciousness, open themselves to new ways of understanding, and take effective action for change” (p. 157). The critical theory paradigm helps me question the current beliefs surrounding the education of students with severe disabilities that perpetuate inequitable educational experiences, and I can examine how special education teachers attempt to break the stigma and create inclusive and high-quality learning opportunities for their students.

Conceptual Framework

Gloria Anzaldúa understood that minority and historically oppressed groups situated on the fringes of society do not inherently gain access to the mainstream culture. In her book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa (2012) describes her autohistoria-teoria (theorizing self-story) of how her identity as a Chicana, lesbian woman from a working-class Catholic family influenced her identity development. Her awareness of her in-between identity situated within a borderland culture led her to achieving *mestiza consciousness* which theorizes how “the experiences of individuals who are exposed to contradictory social systems” shape identity (p. 7). Across her lifetime, Anzaldúa developed many theories that stemmed from her initial mestiza consciousness theory. Her later writings emphasized how shifting consciousness can promote social change (Keating, 2006). In one of Anzaldúa’s last publications *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation*, Anzaldúa describes a path to achieve spiritual

activism that she terms *conocimiento* (Anzaldúa, 2002a). This shift from mestiza consciousness toward *conocimiento* also moved Anzaldúa's theories away from rigid labels, identity politics, and loyalty to singular causes, in favor of a state of *el mundo zurdo*, also referred to as new tribalism, where diverse groups of people are all accepted (Keating, 2006). She did not call for assimilation into the majority culture; but instead, she believed that new tribalism honored otherness and empowered all. Anzaldúa organizes *conocimiento* into seven stages (*el arrebató*, *Nepantla*, *Coatlicue*, the call, putting Coyolxauhqui together, the blow-up, and shifting realities) but also points out that the stages are recursive (Anzaldúa, 2002a). In an interview about her theories, Anzaldúa stated that people who go through *conocimiento* "have to shift the frame of reference, reframe the issue or situation being looked at, and connect the disparate parts of information in new ways or from a perspective that's new" to achieve a greater state of self-awareness and reflective consciousness (Anzaldúa, 2000b, p. 178). In the seventh stage of *conocimiento*, referred to as shifting realities, the person achieves a new sense of spiritual activism and is able to challenge and transform unjust social structures (Keating, 2006). From Anzaldúa's theory describing the path of *conocimiento*, I focus on the concept of the *nepantlera* as facilitators of change and the *nos/otras* as the embodiment of 'us' and 'other' positions within society.

Nepantlera

The second stage of *conocimiento* is the *nepantla* stage which is considered the in-between space where transformation can take place (Anzaldúa, 2002a). People who experience *nepantla* are referred to as *nepantleras*. Keating (2006) writes that the *nepantleras* are considered threshold people who reject labels and can mediate from their spaces in-between worlds.

Anzaldúa (2002a) acknowledges that the *nepantla* stage can be dangerous because some level of conflict is inevitable, and because of their activist work, the *nepantlera* put themselves at risk for

burnout, rejection, and heresy. Anzaldúa reconceptualizes her use of the bridge metaphor from her earlier Borderlands Theory where the bridge was crossed for a person to achieve mestiza consciousness. The nepantlera does not cross over the bridge; but instead, she dwells on the bridge to represent her rejection of sides, labels, or categories in order to serve as the intermediary and facilitator of change (Koegeler-Abdi, 2013). By reimagining the function of the bridge, Anzaldúa created a more inclusive theory that seeks to “honor people’s otherness in ways that allow us to be changed by embracing that otherness rather than punishing others for having a different view, belief system, skin color, or spiritual practice” (Anzaldúa, 2002b, p. 4). The bridge is an unstable place, but the nepantlera accepts the risks involved in the uncertainty for the sake of engaging in activist work.

Special Education Teachers as Nepantlera

When I first read Anzaldúa’s work, I was drawn to the concept of the nepantlera negotiating between spaces to advocate for oppressed groups. Anzaldúa wrote about how her own physical and medical impairments shaped her identity and development of her theories when she stated that her “resistance to gender and race injustice stemmed from my physical difference” (Anzaldúa, 2000a, p. 288). Her writings demonstrate that she was aware of how perceived difference from the norm could lead to oppression by the mainstream, but when people were willing to advocate for marginalized and oppressed groups, Anzaldúa believed that societal change was possible (Keating, 2006).

Downing (2005) argues that any classroom placement can be a space where students with severe disabilities are either actively engaged or passive recipients of learning, so the responsibility then falls to the teacher to ensure that the students are active participants and that the instruction is high-quality. The special education teachers must negotiate student needs, academic standards, and outside policies and expectations even when at times what they are

negotiating seems contradictory. Downing provides the example of the mandate from the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 that expected *all* students to read on grade level, even though for some students with severe disabilities, conventional reading may not be an attainable skill. Understanding that a student with a severe disability may never read on grade-level does not excuse the special education teacher from limiting the student's exposure to literacy activities, but it does mean that the special education teacher must make informed decisions about how to appropriately develop literacy instruction for that student that is both engaging and of high-quality. As special education teachers learn to negotiate and maneuver within their positions, they become *nepantlera*, or what Ruppert et al. (2017) describe as expert special education teachers who are able to advocate for their students, individualize and adapt academic standards to provide meaningful instruction, and engage in positive collegial relationships to encourage greater collaboration and inclusive opportunities for their students.

Nos/otras and New Tribalism

In Spanish, *nosotras* translates to the female usage of the word 'we,' but broken apart as Anzaldúa did with the slash mark, *nos* translates into 'us' and *otras* as 'others.' Anzaldúa used a slash mark to divide *nos/otras* to signify the divisions within our society (Keating, 2006). Social binaries perpetuate an outsider mentality because if they are 'other,' then 'we' have no responsibility to care for them or include them. Anzaldúa (2002a) wrote that the slash mark represented the bridge between the two groups and that the *nepantleras*, who occupy the bridges, serve as the intermediary. The *nepantleras* hope that one day the bridge will not be necessary because the two groups will shift into a state of *nosotras* or togetherness as 'we.' A society that achieves *nosotras* still has differences, but they acknowledge that in spite of their differences, they share commonalities and do "not depend on traditional categories or sameness" to coexist (p. 570). People coexist in a diverse and accepting society.

The shift from nos/otras to nosotras coincides with Anzaldúa's description of new tribalism. New tribalism rejects the notions of nationalistic identity that value the rights and sovereignty of its citizens over outsiders. The concept of new tribalism represents a rejection of assimilation to the dominant culture; and instead, describes "a dynamic space where *all* belong" (Kasun, 2015, p. 93). Just as the nepantlera dwell on the bridge of nos/otras, they also help facilitate the bonds between different groups in order for new tribalism to occur. They advocate for change, empathy, and awareness of how groups can coexist together.

Nos/otras in School Communities

Anzaldúa believed it was possible to achieve nosotras, but that societal change like this "depends on our truly being willing to encounter the depths of our interrelatedness and, without fear, embracing the power and potential" of this connection (Zaytoun, 2011, p. 208). Widespread placement of students with severe disabilities into general education classrooms does not solve the issue of acceptance into the mainstream society because it does not address the attitudes and perspectives that relegated them to separate spaces initially. For this attitudinal change to take place, I believe it is appropriate to consider Anzaldúa's theory of the nos/otras and how the nepantlera serve as intermediaries on the bridge between the two groups. Within each local school, there is the mainstream school community that I view as the nos. This school community is comprised of the students who attend general education classrooms and their teachers, as well as school personnel like the office staff, administrators, custodians, cafeteria staff, and librarians. The otras in this context are the students with severe disabilities. When special education teachers engage in this setting as nepantlera, they represent the slash mark between the nos and otras and act as intermediaries between the two groups. The nos/otras coexist within one local school context, but how the otras are accepted and able to engage in that school context does depend somewhat on the decisions that the special education teacher makes to ensure student

involvement. For instance, there is no clear expectation in my school that my students with severe disabilities eat lunch in the cafeteria. Other special education teachers that I work with choose to have their class eat lunch in the self-contained classroom. Because I advocate for my students to participate in this setting, I am increasing their ability to be included in the greater school community and engage with their peers and other school personnel. The conceptualization of the *nos/otras* provides a model for understanding how students with severe disabilities can either maintain their marginalization through their status as outsiders of the school community or how special education teachers as *nepantlera* can support their students into a space closer to a seamless *nosotras*. Anzaldúa states that by engaging in *nepantlera* work, we can “cultivate cultural sensitivities to differences and [...] use these abilities to forge a hybrid consciousness that transcends the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality and will carry us into a *nosotras* position bridging the extremes of our cultural realities” (Anzaldúa, 2000c, p. 255). Instead of considering the debate of inclusion on where students with severe disabilities physically go, I want to shift the debate toward a consideration of how special education teachers raise awareness of their students’ capacities and advocate for a space of *nosotras* where all students belong.

Organization of Remaining Chapters

In Chapter 1, I introduced the background and purpose for my study, and I described the framework that I use to conceptualize this study. In Chapter 2, I review the literature concerning students with severe disabilities and low-incidence special education teachers. I begin this review by describing the historical trajectory for people with intellectual disabilities and conclude with the current research surrounding curricular trends, perspectives of special education teachers, and inclusive educational practices. In Chapter 3, I describe the methodological approach for my study. In Chapter 4, I discuss my findings of the study, and in Chapter 5, I discuss implications and suggestions for future research.

2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In Chapter 1, I described my entry point into the field of special education as well as my negotiation of the literature as it related to my current practices as a special education teacher. I defined the terms severe disabilities, inclusive education, and high-quality instruction, and I explained how my epistemology and conceptual framework informs my understanding of the importance of special education teachers as advocates for their students' educational experiences. Chapter 2 focuses on the literature that serves as a foundation for my study. First, I trace the history of people with intellectual disabilities to understand how the mindsets and practices of the past have shaped the present. Next, I look specifically at the history of special education in the United States starting in the early 1900s, and I explore the shifts in curriculum and learning expectations for students with severe disabilities. I review the literature related to self-contained special education classes and inclusion classes, and I discuss some of the limitations to research recently conducted within inclusion classes. Finally, I review the literature concerning quality education programs for students with severe disabilities and relate this research to my study.

History of Intellectual Disabilities

History is the recording and retelling of peoples' stories and experiences. Where I choose to start my timeline influences how I represent the history of people with intellectual disabilities. Many research articles start the story of students with intellectual disabilities in 1975 when Public Law 94-142 was signed into law by President Gerald Ford (Courtade, Gurney, & Carden, 2017; Matzen, Ryndak, & Nakao, 2010; Roberts, Leko, & Wilkerson, 2013). Beginning at this point in history makes sense if I am only considering the impact of public education on this group; however, children with intellectual disabilities existed long before 1975. To understand the status and realities of people with intellectual disabilities in the present, it is important to consider how their place in society has evolved over a longer period of time than the past 44

years. For as long as humans have existed on this earth, there have been documented cases of people with disabilities. Anthropologists recorded evidence of people with disabilities from over 50,000 years ago (Brown, Radford, & Wehmeyer, 2017), and in 1552 B.C., the Egyptian Papyrus of Thebes, a medical document, references the condition of intellectual disabilities (Harris, 2006). Throughout history, people with intellectual disabilities' place in society has been situated on the fringes and never one of full inclusion. They have been treated as convenient sources of labor, regarded as street entertainment; and labeled demonically possessed, immoral, and dangers to society. Mothers were encouraged to abandon their infants with disabilities at churches (Mutua et al., 2011) or keep their child at home, removed from the community (Osgood, 2008). As they got older, adults with intellectual disabilities were left to live on the streets, in inhumane conditions, jails, and almshouses. At the same time, different religious and social groups, families, and scholars have advocated for more humane and equitable treatment of people with intellectual disabilities. In the first part of this chapter, I describe the historical situation of people with intellectual disabilities from the medieval period until the present to demonstrate the longstanding position of people with intellectual disabilities as second-class citizens. In the second part, I explore the research surrounding inclusive educational practices and the roles of low-incidence special education teachers. The purpose of this review is to examine the complexities of implementing inclusive practices in schools for a group of people who have never held an equitable place within society.

Middle Ages to Enlightenment: Fifth to Eighteenth Centuries

Throughout antiquity and leading up to the Middle Ages, people with intellectual disabilities “were likely unnoticed if their level of impairment required minimal support” (Brown et al., 2017, p. 22). People who had less visible disabilities and impairments were more likely to live within society without discrimination. During the Middle Ages from around the 5th century

to the 15th century, people with intellectual disabilities experienced various degrees of acceptance and rejection within their communities. Because of the high mortality rate among Europeans during this time period, people with intellectual disabilities who could work were used for manual labor (Mutua et al., 2011). Mental hospitals, hospices, and asylums were established throughout Europe, North Africa, and what is now considered the Middle East by religious organizations to care for people with physical and intellectual disabilities (Harris, 2006). Children with intellectual disabilities were seen as innocent and of God, so religious groups advocated for their humane treatment.

The Protestant Reformation during the 16th century brought with it changes in how those with disabilities were viewed. People believed disabilities were a consequence of immoral behavior, and if a mother gave birth to a child with an intellectual disability, it was believed that the mother's "actions resulted in the birth of the impure child" (Mutua et al., 2011, p. 92). People with intellectual disabilities were believed to be possessed by demons, and religious leaders performed exorcisms in an attempt to cure them (Harris, 2006). Because of high taxes and an increase in poverty, professional beggars filled cities across Europe looking for ways to solicit money. They purchased children who were poor and some with intellectual disabilities to beg on the streets. The beggars realized that the more physically disabled a child looked, the more pity, and therefore more money, they received. The beggars would break the children's legs or physically assault them to ensure the children elicited the most money possible (Mutua et al., 2011). When the children were no longer of use to the beggars, they were cast aside.

Entering into the Enlightenment period of the 17th and 18th centuries, there was a greater emphasis placed on scientific experiments and logic to explain and categorize certain phenomena (Harris, 2006; Mutua et al., 2011). Efforts to cure disability also shifted from religious

exorcisms, and doctors developed primitive medical procedures, such as bloodletting and drilling a hole in the skull (Harris, 2006). People with intellectual disabilities were seen by society as needing care, but they were also able to be taken advantage of because of their low-status and impoverished living conditions. Almshouses and institutions existed at the time, but people with intellectual disabilities more commonly received care from their families. As societies placed a greater emphasis on scientific investigation to understand and explain the world, the 19th and 20th centuries brought on even greater shifts in how people with intellectual disabilities were treated by the mainstream.

The Modern Era: Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

The 19th and early 20th centuries brought about change for different groups of people throughout the world. The United States experienced an influx of immigrants from Europe as well as the ending of slavery after the Civil War. Three major changes during this time period influenced societal views of people with intellectual disabilities: the rise of institutions, the creation of intelligence tests, and the eugenics movement (Brown et al., 2017; Harris, 2006).

Institutions

Institutions and asylums existed as far back as the medieval period in Europe as places where people with intellectual disabilities could go when their families could not care for them. In the United States, the first institution for people with intellectual disabilities opened in 1848 as a place where children could receive job training and then reenter the community and join the workforce (Harris, 2006). Some special schools exclusively for students with disabilities were established during this time in major cities like Boston, Chicago, Providence, and New York, with the intention of educating students with disabilities (Wehmeyer et al., 2017). Although institutions were initially intended to be safe, humane places for people with intellectual disabilities, as more of them were built, the overall quality of them declined. After the Civil War

and the economic recession that followed, there were fewer employment opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities. During this time, institutions shifted from centers for job training to places providing “lifelong protective custodial care” (Harris, 2006, p. 19). Workers at the institutions had inadequate understandings of how to handle different disabilities and believed that residents’ intellectual disabilities made them incapable of learning (Brown et al., 2017).

Over time, institutions became overcrowded and received less public funding, which resulted in rundown and inhumane living conditions (Harris, 2006). As families and advocates learned about the deplorable conditions in institutions, they began a movement to close the institutions in favor of more community-based programs. By the mid-1900’s, there was a growing trend for more acceptance and equitable treatment of people with intellectual disabilities because they “were equally entitled to all that society had to offer, which was not possible living within institutions” (Brown et al., 2017, p. 30). Even though institutions were founded on the vision of progressive facilities that could help people with intellectual disabilities integrate into society, the general sentiment toward people with intellectual disabilities was still one of fear and rejection. Institutions began to devolve into care facilities where the care was extremely lacking.

Intelligence Tests

During the late 19th century and early 20th century, medical and educational professionals wanted to develop scientific measures to objectively diagnose and classify intellectual disabilities with the “degrees of idiocy” (Brown et al., 2017, p. 28). Before the creation of intelligence tests, diagnosing a child with an intellectual disability was a haphazard process (Wehmeyer et al., 2017). Psychologists and educational professionals wanted to ensure that children who needed specialized educational services beyond traditional public school could be identified. In 1905, French psychologists Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon developed the Binet-

Simon intelligence test. It was the first intelligence test used to identify children with intellectual disabilities for placement in special classes and schools in Europe and the United States (Harris, 2006). In New York, Elizabeth Farrell created ungraded classes for children with intellectual disabilities identified by intelligence tests (Wehmeyer et al., 2017). In these ungraded classes, students received training for manual labor jobs. As the intelligence test became more readily available, it was used to measure the intelligence of other groups for more ominous purposes.

Over time, the popularity of intelligence tests corrupted their initial intent. Harris (2006) describes how intelligence tests were used at points of entry to the United States, and if an immigrant scored too low, they were denied entry into the country. The tests were also used with criminals and poor people to promote the idea that socially maladaptive behavior was correlated with a low IQ. Because intelligence tests were seen as independent, scientific measures, their use legitimized views about how certain sections of society were inherently deviant. People who scored lower on intelligence tests were seen as unstable and more likely to commit crimes (Mutua et al., 2011) with little consideration of how issues like poverty, lack of educational access, or medical care played a role. Those who had intellectual disabilities were believed to have an incurable disease that caused them to engage in deviant behavior. Intelligence tests helped propagate the link between heredity, intellectual disability, and immorality, which laid the groundwork for racial and class bias propagated by the eugenics movement.

Eugenics Movement

With the advent of intelligence testing came the notion that some people were not capable of benefiting society. People with intellectual disabilities were seen as “socially deviant” who “downgraded the species” (Harris, 2006, p. 21). People feared the potential of rise in delinquent behavior and poverty within communities because intellectual disabilities were viewed as

incurable diseases that were genetically passed onto future generations. Connected to eugenics was the concept of social Darwinism, which promoted the idea that people with intellectual disabilities were unfit for survival and too great of a burden to warrant care. The purpose of the eugenics movement was to “influence the genetic makeup of a society” by “isolating and reducing reproduction” among people who were deemed unfit (Brown et al., 2017, p. 30). In 1904, the American Breeders Association put forth the idea that people with intellectual disabilities were a danger to the white race, and sexual sterilization was the way to ensure that purity was sustained (Mutua et al., 2011). The rights of states to sexually sterilize people with intellectual disabilities was upheld in the Supreme Court decision *Buck v. Bell* in 1927. The eugenics movement led to the sexual sterilization of over 47,000 people with intellectual disabilities from 1907 to 1949, including many housed in institutions (Harris, 2006). In addition to sterilization, doctors in the early 1900’s denied medical treatment to newborns with disabilities or birth defects so many of them died (Harris, 2006). During World War II, the eugenics ideology of preserving the white race was used as justification for the murder of millions of people deemed undesirable, including “millions of Jews; approximately 5,000 children with disabilities; and thousands of other people with mental illness, other disabilities, and various differences (e.g., ethnic minorities, Romani or ‘gypsies,’ ... [and] homosexuals)” (Brown et al., 2017, p. 30). After the atrocities of World War II became known across the world, the eugenics ideology was no longer viewed as credible science. The ending of the eugenics movement combined with the closing of institutions brought on a new wave of interest in civil and human rights and calls for integration of people with intellectual disabilities.

Civil Rights from 1954 to 1975

In the early 20th century, people with intellectual disabilities were often denied access to public education, fair housing, reproductive rights, and job training. When *Brown vs. Board of*

Education came through the Supreme Court in 1954, advocates for children with intellectual disabilities seized on the moment to push for equal access to public education for people with disabilities. Parents questioned the legitimacy of institutions if they were not providing educational opportunities for their children and advocated for public school access and better social services (Downing, 2010; Wehmeyer et al., 2017). Bengt Nirje introduced the concept of *normalization*, which advocated for altering the environment to support people with intellectual disabilities by “abandoning the stereotypes and ideologies of difference and substituting the principles of inclusion” (Brown et al., 2017, p. 31). Nirje and other proponents of normalization believed that people with intellectual disabilities had the same rights as any other human. Normalization and other inclusive movements helped promote deinstitutionalization in favor of community-based living as well as educational access in public schools. These inclusive movements were also supported by legal rulings upheld in the court system.

In 1972, two major lawsuits, *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* and *Mills v. Board of Education*, challenged the practice of “denying the due process rights of children with disabilities to receive a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment” (Ashbaker, 2011, p. 28). PARC argued in front of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania that schools had no rational basis to exclude children with intellectual disabilities from receiving a public education. In *Mills v. Board of Education*, the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia ruled that lack of funding was not an excuse to deny education to a student with a disability. Around this time, 36 other court cases in 27 states ruled that students with disabilities had the right to a free and appropriate public education, so the United States Senate introduced a bill in 1972 to require free access to public education, due process, and equal protections for children with disabilities. The

bill was signed into law by President Ford in 1975, and it became known as Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. Since 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act has been amended or reauthorized by Congress six times; and in the 1990 amendment, it was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act to reflect the importance of person-first language (Harris, 2006). Although PL 94-142, and subsequent amendments to the law, protect the right for all children with disabilities to access free and appropriate public education in the least-restrictive environment, many students with intellectual disabilities still to this day remain in mostly self-contained classrooms (Polloway et al., 2019), and longstanding, situated beliefs about their inability to learn influence the quality of education they receive (Ruppar, 2017). Least-restrictive environment refers to the setting where special education services are provided with the intention that most students with disabilities receive their instruction in the regular education class, but as students require more complex services that cannot be addressed in the general education setting, there is a slightly more restrictive placement that can address those needs. Reynolds (1962) proposed a model representing a framework for special education services with regular classroom at the bottom as the least-restrictive environment, full-time special class in the middle, and hospital and treatment centers at the top and most restrictive. While a general education setting is viewed as the ideal place for all students to receive academic instruction, Polloway et al. (2019) used data from the US Department of Education to show that only “17.0% of students with ID were reported to have spent 80% or more of their day in the general education classroom, 26.3% spent between 40%-79% of the day in regular classes, 49.4% spent less than 40% in such settings” (p. 32). In the next section, I describe the advent of special education programs in the United States and consider how recent legislation in the last 20 years has shaped mandates for inclusive education.

I also trace the curricular trends for students with intellectual disabilities after they gained access to public education in 1975.

History of Special Education for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

In 1919, the Supreme Court of Wisconsin ruled in the case *Beattie v. State Board of Education* that a student with a physical impairment could be denied access to his neighborhood public school because his “presence was deemed depressing and nauseating to other students” (Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 2011, p. 8). Although the student in this case was performing on-grade level and did not have a diagnosis of an intellectual disability, the court’s decision to deny him rights to public education demonstrates the general sentiment to children with disabilities at the time. In the early 20th century, children with intellectual disabilities lived mostly in residential institutions and received minimal, if any, educational opportunities. Martin Barr (1904) published the first textbook on intellectual disabilities. In the forward to the book, he wrote that “endeavoring to emphasize the utter hopelessness of cure, and also the needless waste of energy in attempting to teach an idiot, I have sought to make clear the possibilities that may be attained in the training of the imbecile” (p. vii). During this time, *idiot* was a term used for a person who today would have the diagnosis *severe intellectual disability* and an IQ score below 40 while *imbecile* would be someone with a *moderate intellectual disability* and an IQ score between 40 and 60 (Osgood, 2005). Barr (1904) was describing how children with severe disabilities were ineducable while children with moderate intellectual disabilities were at least trainable. Educational opportunities were scarce for children with intellectual disabilities, and because of the eugenics movement during this time, few believed that children with intellectual disabilities were capable of learning.

Special education started in public schools as a program to address the needs of students who needed extra support. Throughout the 1800’s, large cities established separate special

schools for immigrant children who spoke limited English or children who had behavioral, learning, or physical impairments that influenced their ability to keep up in traditional classes (Osgood, 2008). By the early 1900's, there were around 75 total special classes for children with mild intellectual disabilities in cities across the United States. Throughout the 1900's, these special schools for students who were considered educably mentally retarded (EMR) continued to open and by 1941 there were a total of 141 classes across the country (Winzer, 2009). During this time, students considered eligible for EMR had an IQ between 50 and 85, and there was a vast over-representation of minority students and immigrants in this population because the intelligence tests used to identify them were not normed for a diverse population (Redfield & Kraft, 2012). In 1973, the American Association on Mental Deficiency adopted the position that mild intellectual disability should constitute an IQ of 50 to 70 which eliminated over 80% of those considered intellectually disabled and eventually brought on the creation of new eligibility categories for what are now considered high-incidence disabilities, including learning and behavior disorders (Winzer, 2009). Prior to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, students with more severe intellectual disabilities were housed in institutions and had no legal rights to attend either public schools or special schools.

Curriculum for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

When Barr (1904) published the first textbook about intellectual disabilities, he dedicated one chapter to the training and treatment of children with intellectual disabilities, who were referred to at the time as *idiots* or *feble-minded*. Osgood (2005) described how intelligence tests further delineated degrees of idiocy with the labels *moron*, *imbecile*, and *idiot* (presently mild, moderate, and severe). In Barr's (1904) chapter, he states that children with intellectual disabilities are not perceptive and need direct instruction on life skills that non-disabled peers pick up on naturally, such as eating, dressing, and walking. Children who were diagnosed as

idiots (presently referred to as a severe intellectual disability) required nothing more than residency at an “asylum, giving that care and attention found in every well-regulated nursery of delicate children, the *sine qua non* being regular hours, simple nourishing food, frequent baths, and tender mothering” (p. 134). The notion that children with intellectual disabilities need systematic, direct instruction continues to permeate the current research on instructional teaching methods although the focus on what that curricular instruction is has shifted over time with different educational movements.

Developmental Skills Curriculum

When children with disabilities were finally granted the right to free and appropriate education under the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, students with severe intellectual disabilities remained in separate educational settings, and their teachers implemented a curriculum focused on developmental skills. Downing (2010) describes the developmental curriculum as juvenile, in that regardless of their age, students worked on very basic skills like stringing beads, coloring, and learning letter sounds. Students received their instruction in separate classrooms or schools and had little-to-no interaction with their same-age peers. Many of the students did not remain in school long enough to master these developmental skills and had trouble transitioning from school into adult life.

Functional Skills Curriculum

Because transitioning into the community was seen as the ultimate goal for students with severe intellectual disabilities, from the late 1970’s and onward, the curricular focus was on functional skills to promote independent living in the community (Roberts & Leko, 2013). The functional curriculum was viewed as more age-appropriate and focused on skills such as doing laundry, dressing, preparing food, and navigating the community. Through the 1980’s and

1990's, the functional curriculum continued to be the primary learning objective for students with severe intellectual disabilities; however, there were also calls during this time for some inclusive time with non-disabled peers in general education settings to help students with severe intellectual disabilities develop basic social skills (Downing, 2010). Researchers, policymakers, teachers, parents, and advocates debate what the purpose of inclusion should be and how much inclusion is appropriate (Wehmeyer et al., 2017). The decision of inclusion in a general education setting or other more restrictive settings is currently left up to the individual educational committees at local schools.

Standards-Based Academic Curriculum

The next major curricular shift for students with intellectual disabilities occurred in 2001 when No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was signed into law. NCLB (2001) required students with intellectual disabilities to receive an educational program linked to grade level standards and participate in school-wide accountability measures, such as standardized tests (Ayres, Lowrey, Douglas, & Sievers, 2011). When the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was reauthorized in 2004, the law reinforced the position of NCLB that students with intellectual disabilities receive access to the general education, but both laws were vague about what is considered appropriate and meaningful access to the general curriculum for these students, so the responsibility fell to special education teachers to make the determination on behalf of their students. Most recently, Every Child Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) continued to support general education curriculum access for students with intellectual disabilities and also required the use of evidence-based practices by special education teachers (Spooner, McKissick, & Knight, 2017). Evidence-based practices refer to teaching methods that are found to be empirically effective for

a certain population of students. Calls for the use of evidence-based practices mirror the focus on scientific inquiry and empirical data that came out of the Enlightenment period.

Since the introduction of the standards-based curriculum, much of the research has focused on specialized teaching strategies, such as task analysis, time delay, and prompting (Downing, 2010). Teaching strategies reinforce the use of systematic instruction, similar to what Barr (1904) described, that help make academic content more accessible to students with intellectual disabilities. Some argue that teaching academic content instead of functional skills goes against the best interest of students with intellectual disabilities (Ayres et al., 2011), while others argue that not teaching academic content infringes on students' right to a full education (Courtade et al., 2012). Turnbull, Turnbull, Wehmeyer, and Park (2003) argue "that mere access to the general education curriculum does not suffice and that IDEA really intends a far more robust curriculum to be available to students with disabilities" (p. 73). Focusing on academic content could be interpreted as a return to the developmental skills curriculum, especially for students with severe disabilities who cannot master the basic prerequisite skills necessary to appropriately access grade level content.

In spite of the debates between the prioritization of functional and academic curricula, a considerable amount of research demonstrates that students with intellectual disabilities are capable of learning academic content, including sight word acquisition (Alberto, Waugh, & Fredrick, 2010), reading comprehension (Downing, 2005), sentence writing (Pennington et al., 2018), mathematical problem-solving (Rivera & Baker, 2013), and science vocabulary acquisition (Spooner, McKissick, Knight, & Walker, 2014) when they are presented systematically and in meaningful ways. Researchers have also demonstrated that technology can help make instruction more accessible (Courduff, Szapkin, & Wendt, 2016), support

communication needs (Binger & Kent-Walsh, 2017), and develop composition skills (Pennington, 2016) for students with intellectual disabilities. Special education teachers require strong pedagogical skills in order to navigate the curricular standards and teaching strategies to ensure their instruction is relevant, meaningful, and high-quality as mandated by NCLB (2001), IDEA (2004), and ESSA (2015). It is their responsibility to interpret the laws, curriculum, and needs of their students when deciding what educational choices to make. The teachers' job then becomes fitting their students with severe intellectual disabilities into a system that was never designed for them. Although laws describe the need for students with severe intellectual disabilities to have access to the mainstream educational system, they do not describe how or to what extent that access occurs. The laws leave those decisions up to the individualized education program (IEP) committee within each local school who hopefully makes the decisions based on what is best and will be most educationally beneficial for the student; however, issues related to high attrition rates for special education teachers (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008), funding cuts (Winzer, 2009), and unclear expectations from administrators on the role of special education in their schools (Roberts, Ruppert, & Olson, 2018) suggest that the decisions made on behalf of students with severe disabilities is more complicated than a singular *what is best for that student* decision. Although curriculum is an important piece of the educational experience for students with severe disabilities, it is often overshadowed by a discussion of where that instruction takes place. In the remaining sections of the paper, I describe the research related to educational experiences in self-contained classes, define inclusion, and describe some of the limitations surrounding how inclusion is implemented in schools. I also describe characteristics of quality education programs that considers a more holistic view of educational experiences for students with severe disabilities.

Self-Contained Classes for Students with Severe Disabilities

Most students with severe intellectual disabilities receive their academic instruction primarily in a self-contained classroom (Polloway et al., 2019). Research surrounding what happens in these spaces has recently focused on the perspectives of the special education teachers, perceptions about self-contained classrooms and special education teachers by administrators, and quasi-experimental research on instructional teaching strategies.

Perspectives of Special Education Teachers

Researchers identify low-incidence special education teachers as the group of special education teachers who specifically provide instruction to students with severe disabilities, typically in a self-contained classroom. These special education teachers are expected to have certain pedagogical expertise in making instruction accessible and responsive to their students' unique needs (Jones & Lawson, 2015). Jones and Lawson found that teachers develop this pedagogical knowledge by interacting with other school personnel, parents, and students in their class, through self-reflection, and with professional development opportunities. Their experiences help inform and shape the decisions they make so that they can adjust their instruction to respond to their students' needs. Stough and Palmer (2003) also found that over time special education teachers, both in inclusive and self-contained settings, develop deep knowledge about their students and pedagogical practices, and the teachers use this knowledge to help students actively engage in the curriculum.

If special education teachers do not have adequate pedagogical knowledge and feel ill-prepared to meet the needs of their students, the teachers can adopt a deficit-view of the students with severe disabilities and have low expectations for academic achievement. Ruppert (2017) used a case study methodology to understand how one special education teacher and his paraprofessionals carried out reading instruction for high school students with autism and

intellectual disabilities. Ruppap found that the teacher and paraprofessionals attributed lack of student progress with the nature of the students' disabilities, which in turn reinforced the teachers' low expectations for student achievement. The teacher did not have the pedagogical skills to create more responsive or individualized instruction, which further perpetuated the inability of the students to experience academic progress. This study shows that even though low-incidence special education teachers are expected to come into their roles with the pedagogical knowledge and skills to provide accessible instruction for their students, there are still some low-incidence special education teachers who need more professional development around instruction and need to be challenged on their views when they engage in deficit-thinking about their students' abilities.

Petersen (2016) described the roles of low-incidence special education teachers as “coordinating and planning for specifically designed instruction that is both aligned to the general education curriculum and individualized to meet each student’s unique learning needs and goals” as well as measuring students’ academic progress, supporting students’ participation in alternative assessments, and maintain high expectations (p. 20). Low-incidence special education teachers in Petersen’s study reflected on the challenges of teaching students age-appropriate and accessible content when the students may be cognitively functioning much lower than their chronological age. They also spoke about the importance of collaborating with general education teachers and fellow special education teachers when negotiating the academic content standards.

Ruppap et al. (2017) interviewed low-incidence special education teachers who were considered expert teachers, and they concluded that experts demonstrate four characteristics: high-expectations, positivity, flexibility and creativity, and desire for continual improvement.

With those characteristics, the experts were able to advocate for their student needs, develop systematic and individualized instruction, and build strong relationships with colleagues.

Although all of the participants taught in self-contained classroom settings, one teacher in particular reflected on using her advocacy skills to create inclusive opportunities for her students and challenge the perceptions of what her students were capable of achieving. The participant stated that by fostering independence, creating opportunities for peer interactions, and teaching academic content, she “helps give their students ‘a better image’ in the eyes of the school community because positive interactions and demonstrations of their students’ high achievements will engender high expectations and increase opportunities for inclusion” (p. 126). By having high expectations for her students and providing instruction that helps the students be more independent, the expert low-incidence special education teacher shifted the narrative away from a deficit view of disability and instead fostered acceptance within the school community.

Perceptions of Self-Contained Classrooms and Special Education Teachers

Administrators set the tone and vision for their schools. Their leadership fosters culture within the building and plays an important role in teachers’ job satisfaction and decisions around attrition (Kaff, 2004). Roberts et al. (2018) interviewed 12 administrators, including elementary and high school principals as well as district level administrators, about their perceptions of special education teacher expertise and vision for instruction of students with severe disabilities. The administrators who supervised teachers in self-contained settings believed that expert special education teachers had the ability to manage students, paraprofessionals, and related service providers; maintained a positive demeanor; communicated with students and control behaviors; and served as caretakers. The administrators did not discuss the instructional practices of the teachers, which suggests that they value the special education teachers’ abilities to care and manage students more so than teaching the students. The administrators’ perspectives

perpetuated deficit views about students with severe disabilities, which in turn further stigmatized the students and created low expectations for the teachers to provide academic instruction to their students. De-professionalizing low-incidence special education teachers in this way further relegates them and their students outside of the school community and perpetuates the notion that they have a separate, less rigorous set of expectations than general education teachers and students.

Quasi-Experimental Research Pertaining to Teaching Strategies

Much of the research surrounding the development of evidenced-based practices for students with severe disabilities takes place in self-contained classroom settings using quasi-experimental quantitative design methods. Robert Pennington and various research partners have repeatedly designed studies around the development of written composition skills for students with severe disabilities. Pennington and Koehler (2017) looked at the use of modeling, story templates, and self-graphing to develop narrative stories with three middle school students with moderate intellectual disabilities. Pennington et al. (2018) looked at the use of response prompting and sentence frames as a strategy to teach sentence writing to students with moderate intellectual disabilities. The teacher in the study provided the instruction in a self-contained classroom 1:1 while the paraprofessional worked with the rest of the students in the class. Pennington, Collins, Stenhoff, Turner, and Gunselman (2014) examined the use of simultaneous prompting and computer-assisted instruction to teach narrative writing composition skills to five elementary students with autism in a self-contained classroom. Modeling, response prompting, and simultaneous prompting are considered evidence-based practices, and each of the studies used a type of multiple-probe, quasi-experimental design. Because most students with intellectual disabilities receive more than half of their instruction in self-contained classrooms, it is a convenient and naturalistic location for researchers to access students and teachers and

develop teaching strategies that are evidence-based, aligned to the curriculum, and responsive to the individual needs of students.

Inclusion for Students with Severe Disabilities

Over the last 20 years, researchers, educators, advocates, and parents have called for more inclusive opportunities for students with severe disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities, and autism. No Child Left Behind (2001) ushered in a new set of academically oriented curricular expectations for special education teachers who teach students with intellectual disabilities, and some researchers argued that if students with and without disabilities were learning the same curriculum, they should learn it in the same inclusive classroom space (Downing, 2010). While some view the shift from functional to academic curriculum brought on by NCLB as a positive change that promoted more access to mainstream curriculum for students with severe disabilities, NCLB is most often remembered as the law that ushered in high-stakes testing so that “100 percent of the students would be on track to achieve proficiency by 2013/2014. Each school was required to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward the proficiency goal and was subject to consequences if it failed to do so” (Ladd, 2017, p. 461). As a consequence of the law, many general education classes, especially those with higher rates of poverty, students of color, and English as a second language (ESL) populations, saw AYP as an insurmountable goal. Teachers narrowed their curriculum and focused on only the literacy and mathematics that would be on the test at the end of the year (Kantor & Lowe, 2013), while other teachers and administrators felt so pressured to meet AYP that they falsified testing documents to ensure higher scores (Ladd, 2017). NCLB (2001) made classrooms across the nation less inclusive for any child who could not perform at their grade level, and especially less inclusive for students with severe disabilities who require extensive modifications to access the curriculum. Although fulltime inclusion is not the status-quo for most students with intellectual

disabilities, it is important to consider what the context of potentially inclusive spaces are and critically examine whether or not those spaces are capable of being responsive to and inclusive of students who by definition of their disability require extensive supports and modifications to adequately access the space.

Researchers define inclusion in a variety of ways and focus on different facets of inclusion in studies. Ryndak et al. (2000) asked authors of relevant articles and professional books related to students with severe disabilities to define inclusion, and they described five main components to inclusion: placement in a natural setting, all students receiving instruction together, modification of general education curriculum, sense of belonging and equal membership, and a collaborative team of service providers. Downing and Peckham-Hardin (2007) found seven themes related to the educational program for students with severe disabilities that included “being with typical peers, exposure to everything and high expectations, individualized curricular and instructional supports, skilled and knowledgeable staff, collaboration and teaming, a positive and caring environment, and providing a balanced educational program” (p. 22). In contrast with Ryndak et al. (2000), Downing and Peckham-Hardin (2007) acknowledged that it is hard at times to qualify what academic success for students with severe disabilities looks like, especially as students get older and the academic content becomes more complex. Although research demonstrates that students with severe disabilities can access academic content alongside their peers (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007; Grenier, Miller, & Black, 2017; Matzen et al., 2010), there is still wide variation related to the purpose of inclusion, what access to general education curriculum looks like, the roles of general education and special education teachers in inclusive contexts, and whether a self-contained classroom setting is appropriate for some academic instruction.

Researchers and advocates who push for greater inclusion of students with severe disabilities into general education settings argue that inclusion serves two main benefits: increased socialization between students with and without disabilities and providing students with severe disabilities greater access to the standards-based academic curriculum (Cameron & Cook, 2013; Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007; Olson, Leko, & Roberts, 2016). When Ryndak et al. (2000) asked experts to define inclusion, the respondents developed a holistic view of inclusion as a space for collaboration between teachers that provides all students the opportunity to learn together as accepted members of the community, even if students with severe disabilities required certain modifications or supports. While this holistic vision of inclusion summarizes what the purpose of inclusion is, it is difficult to locate studies where this vision is materialized in equally precise reality. Every school across the United States that enrolls students with severe disabilities is different. Administrators have different visions for the schools and choices when allocating funding; students with severe disabilities have different educational needs; and general and special education teachers have different backgrounds, educational specialties, and beliefs about what students with severe disabilities are capable of achieving. These variations in beliefs, expectations, and needs influence how inclusion is materialized for students with severe disabilities.

Formal Inclusion Programs

As inclusion becomes a more widely accepted trend for students with disabilities, some schools and districts have adopted formal inclusion programs that incorporate all students, including those with severe disabilities. Olson et al. (2016) examined the ways that middle school personnel defined and provided access to the general education curriculum for the three students in their building who had a severe intellectual disability. The school was selected as a research site because it received the TASH June Downing Breakthroughs in Inclusive Education

Award for ensuring inclusive and equitable educational opportunities for students with significant disabilities. Olson et al. found that the school personnel viewed inclusion as a shared responsibility and that “authentic inclusion transcends mere physical presence in general education contexts, requiring educational personnel to consider how students with severe disabilities are accessing the content, being held accountable for what they are learning, and participating in classroom and school communities” (p. 153). The administrators had a clear vision for including all students and allocated funding specifically for supporting their inclusive initiatives. While this school provides a clear case study of an exemplar for inclusive education, Olson et al. acknowledge that schools enrolling more than three students with severe disabilities would probably find it challenging to ensure this level of support in the general education settings. The school was located in a suburban Midwestern state, not designated as Title 1, which also raises questions of how plausible an inclusive program like this one would be for schools where administrators have less freedom to allocated funds toward inclusion programs and personnel.

Downing and Peckham-Hardin (2007) interviewed parents, general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals in a charter middle school designed to be fully inclusive where participants saw students without disabilities as able to be “appropriate role models, natural supports, conversational partners, and peers as motivators” (p. 22). The general education setting was seen as a natural environment to encourage socialization between students with severe intellectual disabilities and their peers, although some participants noted that the general education peers did not always have the social and communication skills to maintain peer interactions. Participants also noted that some of the students with severe disabilities engaged in challenging behaviors that caused them to be removed from the general education setting.

Teachers noted that it was easier to believe in inclusion as a pedagogical platform than it was to ensure that meaningful inclusion for students with severe disabilities was actually taking place. Even though the school was founded on a charter of inclusion, the teachers struggled with appropriately modifying the curriculum and assessing students' academic growth.

Matzen et al. (2010) studied a middle school in the second year of implementing a program that provided inclusive services for students with severe disabilities in general education settings. The students with severe disabilities attended some classes in general education settings although the researchers noted that the special education teachers sent the students to the inclusion classes with work. Students with severe disabilities completed the work with a one-on-one peer helper, so there was no expectation for the students participate in the activities or lessons going on in the general education classroom. The school personnel informed parents and general education teachers that the purpose of inclusion was to expose the students with disabilities to their peers so that they could practice social skills, which resulted in the students with severe disabilities maintaining a visitor status within the class and never achieving any sense of belonging or membership.

Even in districts that adopt the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, school personnel sometimes struggle to achieve meaningful inclusion. UDL is a framework for addressing the needs of students with disabilities as well as students from diverse backgrounds by providing “multiple means of representation, multiple means of action and expression, and multiple means of engagement” (Kennette & Wilson, 2019, p. 2). Lowrey, Hollingshead, and Howery (2017) interviewed general education teachers who participated in district wide UDL training and had at least one student in their class with a severe disability. They analyzed the interview data using the parameters of the UDL: membership, instructional planning, and

experiences. Although they did find themes relating to students with severe disabilities belonging within the class culture, teachers intentionality planning for instruction, and teachers experiencing success in providing scaffolded instruction, they also saw evidence of teachers using exclusionary language that perpetuated deficit views of students with severe disabilities, teachers trivializing the principles of UDL, and struggling to feel like they were doing enough to meet their students' needs. These studies demonstrate that schools and districts are attempting to increase opportunities for inclusion, but leaders must remain vigilant in challenging deficit-oriented perspectives that keep students with severe disabilities from being fully accepted members of the school community.

Collaboration in Inclusive Settings

Teachers' expectations for their students influence the types of instructional decisions that they make, which in turn influences the type of educational experiences the students have in the classroom (Lawson & Jones, 2018). Cameron and Cook (2013) examined the expectations of general education teachers who provide inclusion for students with mild and severe disabilities in a general education classroom setting. The researchers found that the general education teachers focused more on the social goals than academics for their students with severe disabilities. The participants reported not feeling confident in their abilities to make the academic content accessible for students with severe disabilities, so they viewed inclusion as a time for students with severe disabilities to socialize with their peers. Downing and Peckham-Hardin (2007) state that "physically bringing students of diverse abilities together is not the goal of inclusion. Rather, providing the most effective learning environment must be the goal for all students" (p. 28). If teachers do not have the specialized pedagogical knowledge to design inclusive lessons for students with severe disabilities, then inclusion is essentially diminished to a program that values physical placement of the students rather than a meaningful opportunity academic and social

instruction. The students with severe disabilities remain segregated from the mainstream even if they are physically existing within the same space. Ryndak et al. (2000) found that for inclusion programs to be successful, there must be ongoing collaboration between educational team members, including general education teachers, special education teachers, and related service personnel.

Although general education and special education teachers were interviewed by Matzen et al. (2010), the authors only reported on the general education teachers' perceptions about inclusion in the results section. The study demonstrates that there are "structural components and resulting logistical barriers" that must be addressed for inclusion programs to be successful (p. 303). The general education teachers and special education teachers were not able to schedule time to collaborate, which made the general education teachers feel uncomfortable developing inclusive, accessible activities for the students with severe disabilities coming into their classrooms. Downing and Peckham-Hardin (2007) found that general education teachers were able to continually communicate and collaborate with special education teachers and related service personnel which ensured that all members of the committee were consistent with their vision of instruction, use of teaching strategies, and ability to promote a positive, inclusive environment for the students with severe disabilities.

When general education teachers feel confident making the curriculum accessible, they can create a holistically inclusive classroom environment. Grenier et al. (2017) describe one general physical education (GPE) teacher's process in creating an inclusive classroom environment for a student with a severe disability who used a wheelchair and communicated using eye contact and gestures. The GPE teacher collaborated with members of the IEP team, including occupational, physical, speech, and vision therapists, to gain a firsthand understanding

of the student's strengths and weaknesses and then used that knowledge to design meaningful lessons that were oriented around the framework of an inclusion spectrum where some activities were open, modified, parallel, or separate. The student worked with a paraprofessional and peer helper during activities that are open, modified, and parallel, but there were times when the student did receive instruction in a separate space when she needed extended, direct support on the skill. Grenier et al. discussed that the student's participation in GPE "does not mean that the student with a disability will be performing the same activities; rather he or she will be participating in age-appropriate activities that strive to meet the IEP goals" in a setting that is inclusive of her peers (p. 53). The GPE teacher in this case study had the expertise and motivation to create an inclusive classroom environment, and she also had the ability to collaborate with IEP team members to ensure her instruction was meaningful and aligned to the students IEP goals.

Quality Education Programs for Students with Severe Disabilities

Rates of inclusion remain generally stagnant across the nation for students with severe disabilities (Polloway et al., 2019), which suggests this population's longstanding historical situation outside of the mainstream has also not significantly shifted in any measurable or meaningful way. Anzaldúa (2002a) described this phenomenon as a state of *nos/otras* where those considered othered are segregated from the mainstream. Turnbull et al. (2003) argue that although NCLB (2001) required access to the general education curriculum, when special education teachers narrowly focus on the core academic standards of English-language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies, they are violating the mandate by IDEA (1997) that considers academics as only one of the educational goals for students with disabilities. Turnbull et al. (2003) discuss that beyond academic instruction, IDEA (1997) guaranteed an educational experience that provides "equality of opportunity [and] full participation" in the school

community and prepares students for post-secondary “independent living and economic self-sufficiency” (p. 69). Students come to school to do more than just learn academic content.

Dewey (1938) believed that education was the accumulation of experiences that prepare a person for the future, and teachers “should know how to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worthwhile” (p. 40). As high stakes testing and narrowed curriculum outcomes become the status quo in general education classes, it is the students with severe disabilities who stand to be the most disenfranchised from these restrictive reforms since they require significant modifications to the academic curriculum.

While full inclusion is seen as the ultimate goal for some families and school personnel, the literature often describes inclusion programs as top-down initiatives organized by administrators (Matzen et al., 2010; Olson et al., 2016), school district leaders (Lowrey et al., 2017), or charter school organizers (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007). These leaders ensure that there is enough funding in the budget allocated to the program, district-wide professional development, and enough personnel to ensure the inclusion program is sustainable. School and district leaders become gatekeepers to inclusion, and students with severe disabilities must be granted access to the inclusive opportunities just as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 afforded them access to public education.

Pennington et al. (2016) discuss that as educational program policies shift, there is little data to suggest what the outcomes for students with severe disabilities will be, and they encourage school personnel to consider designing educational programs that focus on more than just physical inclusion. Pennington et al. outline essential features that any quality educational program for students with severe disabilities should have in school, including a safe and

respectful environment that includes access to peers, dignity, and self-determination, and communicative competence where students with severe disabilities have continual opportunities to interact and communicate with those in the school building and receive instruction to foster communication development. The other essential features include broad instruction that includes grade-level content and life skills that are continually updated by the IEP team; intensive and systematic instruction that is age-appropriate and meaningful for the student; and ongoing evaluation by administrators and teachers to assess progress and make adjustments to instruction as necessary. This framework does not mandate a placement for instruction; but instead, it challenges the special education teacher and other school personnel to consider how their instructional choices create meaningful opportunities for students with severe disabilities to learn and grow while engaging in instruction that supports their continual improvement.

When special education teachers act as *nepantleras* (Anzaldúa, 2002a), they are able to work within the school as an advocate for the instructional and inclusive experiences for their students with severe disabilities. They are able to provide high-quality instruction and challenge notions that students with severe disabilities cannot learn academic content (Roberts et al., 2018), and they are able to negotiate the structural and logistical barriers within the school (Matzen et al., 2010) that serve to keep their students out of inclusive contexts. Kliever et al. (2015) describe the concept of inclusion as the fostering of social connectedness that takes place when non-disabled people suspend “a deficit ideology within contexts of heightened expectations [that] requires recognition of the individual’s right to participate and an acknowledgement that she legitimately belongs in the newly crafted situations” (p. 9). Attempting to implement inclusion programs without ensuring that school personnel have first abandoned their deficit ideology is a futile attempt at bringing students with severe disabilities into the mainstream. Just

as doctors tried to cure intellectual disabilities in the Enlightenment period by bloodletting and drilling holes in the skull of patients, thinking of inclusion as a program to be implemented will not cure the issue of segregated learning experiences for students with severe disabilities. Expert low-incidence special education teachers interviewed by Ruppert et al. (2017) believed that part of their role as a teacher was to help change the narrative and challenge historical stereotypes held by people within their school communities so that they can create meaningful opportunities for inclusion and instruction. The purpose of my study is to examine the perspectives and experiences of low-incidence special education teachers as they engage in that kind of work, through the lens of the *nepantlera*, to understand how they challenge stereotypes of their students and create instructional opportunities that foster the sense of community and belonging that Anzaldúa (2002a) describes as *nosotras*. In the next chapter, I describe the methodology that will support my research question.

3 METHODOLOGY

Egbert and Sanden (2014) argued that research is never objective. Researchers are influenced by their interpretations, experiences, and connections to the topic. Since researchers cannot abandon their experiences, they should understand how their personal epistemology, subjectivities, and positionality impact their position within the research. In this chapter, I describe how my role as the researcher informs how I approach my design of the study. I outline the process I took for data collection and analysis, and I explain ethical considerations, delimitations, limitations, and trustworthiness of my study.

Research Design

Qualitative research methodologies allow researchers to explore and construct understanding based on participants' experiences and perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) identify five features of qualitative research that differentiate it from quantitative research: naturalistic setting, descriptive data, emphasis on the process over product, inductive analysis of data, and concerned with meaning. Qualitative researchers who approach reality from the constructionist epistemological belief view knowledge and meaning as constructions of our engagement with the world, as opposed to the objectivist view that reality is fixed (Crotty, 1998). Because meaning is constructed, researchers must carefully consider what the purpose of their study is and what methodology will best support their research design. Each qualitative methodology differs in its focus, so researchers must select the methodology that best aligns with their epistemology, theoretical frame, and research question. Qualitative methodologies include case study, ethnography, phenomenology, and narrative inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Narrative inquiry is a methodology that focuses on the stories and perspectives of the participants, and the researcher's role is to describe, not explain, participants' experiences

(Kramp, 2004). I selected narrative inquiry for my study because I am concerned with the perspectives and experiences of the special education teachers and how their perspectives shape their decisions about the kinds of educational experiences, instructionally and inclusively, that they create for their students with severe disabilities. Using narrative inquiry allowed me to create what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe as a *three-dimensional space* that includes the temporal, social, and spatial, where “narrative inquirers would find themselves, using a set of terms that pointed them backward and forward, inward and outward, and locating them in place” (p. 54). As I described in chapter two, I situate my understanding of current educational practices within broader historical context of students with severe disabilities in a state of *nos/otras* where they coexist within spaces but are not necessarily accepted as equals. By exploring the perspectives of the special education teachers, I described the teachers’ attempts to use high-quality teaching practices and advocate for greater inclusion to break from the historical tradition of separation of students with severe disabilities from the mainstream. I used Anzaldúa’s conceptualization of the *nepantlera* and *nos/otras* to frame my exploration of special education teachers within their school contexts. Anzaldúa represented many of her theoretical and philosophical concepts through her storytelling technique of *autohistoria-teoria* (theorizing self-story). By using narrative analysis, I synthesized the data and reconstructed the special education teachers’ perspectives and experiences into one cohesive research text connected by narrative threads (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1995).

Context

The study took place in three sites within Watt County School District (pseudonym) to examine the perspectives of special education teachers who engage in inclusive pedagogical practices and deliver high-quality instruction. Watt County is a suburban county in the southeastern United States. The district enrolls over 100,000 students and has a mostly White

population as well as approximately one-third Black, one-quarter Hispanic, and a small population of Asian, Multi-Racial, Pacific Islander, and American Indian. The district operates approximately 100 schools that include a vast socio-economic variation. For instance, one Title 1 elementary school in the district enrolls approximately two-thirds Black students, and six miles down the road, a non-Title 1 elementary school enrolls approximately two-thirds White students. While the district as a whole is diverse, there are concentrations of racial segregation impacted by socio-economic factors. Because Watt County School District has sharp variety in student demographics between schools, it was important for me to attempt to seek out participants from more than one site to explore how the school culture and community shaped the teachers' and students' experiences with inclusive education.

The district employs over 1,000 special education teachers, and approximately 200 of these teachers teach students with severe disabilities. They provide academic instruction primarily in self-contained classroom settings, and the focus of their instruction is a modified academic curriculum. They incorporate functional life skills into daily routines to address the adaptive needs of the students, but the district expects the primary focus to be on addressing the grade-level academic standards. The students in the self-contained classes typically have an eligibility of intellectual disabilities, low-functioning autism, or multiple disabilities. In the grade levels that require state-mandated testing (third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and eleventh), the students participate in a standardized portfolio alternative assessment.

Participants

I recruited three special education teachers employed in Watt County School District who teach students with severe disabilities. I used group characteristic purposeful sampling that focuses on gathering information from key knowledgeable participants (Patton, 2015). Patton describes these participants as having “knowledge, experience, and expertise” that the researcher

can access when constructing understanding about a specific issue or phenomenon (p. 284). I used Palmer, Stough, Burdenski, and Gonzales' (2005) identification procedure for expert teachers that includes the teachers having at least three years of experience teaching students with severe disabilities, are considered by the district to have professional expertise, and have relevant certification in the field. Expertise is a socially constructed label, and there is a distinction between being a veteran teacher, which only describes years of service, and expertise, which is associated with a sense of job quality that is above and beyond the norm regardless of years of service.

The district special education supervisor maintains a list of special education teachers considered experts that is referenced when planning professional development sessions. I asked the district supervisor for recommendations from that list and received the names of nine special education teachers, but I only moved forward with attempting to recruit eight because I was listed as the ninth. I was required to follow the Georgia State University (GSU) and Watt County School District IRB process, and Watt County required that I have approval from building administrators before granting me approval for my study. I reached out to the administrators, explained the purpose of my study, offered to answer any additional questions that they had, and within a few weeks, I received approval from five of the eight administrators. I verified the certificate status of those five teachers as part of Palmer et al.'s (2005) criteria for expert teachers, and all five of the teachers held clear, renewable certificates in adapted curriculum special education. I finalized all required approval with GSU and Watt County, and then I sent an initial email to each of the five special education teachers requesting that they consider taking part in my study. Two teachers, Miss Honey and Lindsey (pseudonyms), responded within the day expressing interest in participating, so I sent them an email copy of the informed consent to

review and asked to set up a time to discuss it with them prior to our initial conversation. One teacher responded that she was unable to participate. After not hearing back from the other two teachers for almost two weeks, I sent a follow-up email, and Michelle (pseudonym) called me to clarify the timeline as she typically had limited availability outside of the school day. Because she taught at the high school level, her start and end time of her school day was different than mine, we made plans that I would leave my school when I was finished, head over to her school where she still had approximately an hour of planning time and conduct the interviews then. This plan however did not come into fruition because of the school closures related to COVID-19, and instead our informed consent session took place virtually, she signed and returned the form to me electronically, and all of my conversations and interviews with her took place virtually. I was able to meet Miss Honey and Lindsey for initial conversations prior to the COVID-19 shutdown, but the other two interviews for each teacher also took place virtually. I reviewed the informed consent form with the participants prior to the initial conversation (see Appendix A for the informed consent form) so that the participants knew that their identity and data was confidential, and they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point (Vogt, Gardner, & Haeffele, 2012).

Preface to Introductions

Over the course of the next few pages, I introduce you to Lindsey, Miss Honey, and Michelle. I describe how they came into their positions as special education teachers based on the stories that they told during our initial conversation and interviews. In this section, as well as in chapter four, I use *italics* when I am directly quoting their words. My interviews with each of the participants were conversational, and at times they did not use the standard English that I am required to use when writing this study. I made the decision at times to drop the words and

phrases ‘um,’ ‘like,’ ‘you know,’ and ‘you know what I mean’ when I felt like those phrases interrupted the flow of what the participant was saying. If the teacher used a shorthand of a phrase, such as *gen ed* or *para*, I used brackets to finish the phrase (i.e. *gen[eral] ed[ucation]* and *para[professional]*), but I did not remove or edit any of the contractions or times when they spoke non-standard English.

Meet Lindsey

Lindsey started her teaching career about seven years ago, which was around the same time I did. She teaches at Hickory Glenn Elementary School, and she has a class of third, fourth, and fifth grade students with moderate intellectual disabilities (MOID) and autism. Hickory Glenn is one of many STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics) elementary schools in the district. Having that STEAM designation, Lindsey is required to teach a certain number of STEAM lessons each month, and *people from the county come in and look at what we are doing to kind of model for what they can use in their school*. Lindsey and I have crossed paths over the years at professional developments and trainings, but when we sat down for our initial conversation, it was the first time she and I spoke for an extended period of time.

Lindsey’s entry point into considering special education as a profession came as a teenager. When Lindsey was in high school, she took a course for students interested in education, and through that course, she was placed as a student teacher in an inclusion class. She told me about how she felt a special connection to one of the boys in the class who had special needs. She said that she *always kept going back to that situation with him, and I was like, man, I think I could teach a whole classroom of just special ed[ucation] kids because they all love to learn, and they love to be at school, and they just have such a loving personality and just love to be around you*. When she went to college, she was in the early childhood education program, but

as she thought back to that high school experience and the boy in the inclusion class, she pursued her degree in special education instead. After college, she accepted the position as the grades 3-5 MOID teacher and has remained at Hickory Glenn ever since.

Lindsey described how in the beginning of her teaching career, she felt like her focus was on *learning how to teach my kids*, but over time she has grown more comfortable in her role as a teacher. She is more willing to speak out and find ways to show what her students are capable of accomplishing. Her shift from novice to experienced teacher has allowed her to advocate for more inclusive opportunities for her students, including a *book buddy* program, an inclusive *science fair*, *pen pals* with general education classes, and a weekly *coffee shop*.

Meet Miss Honey

Miss Honey grew up in the southern region of the United States. She recounted in our initial conversation that she had family members with disabilities, and so because she was around people with disabilities all of her life, she never considered it as a potential career path for her. Miss Honey went to college with the expectation of becoming an English teacher, but it was in her required special education law course that she changed her mind. She admired the professor of the course for her *toughness* and *drive*, and she enjoyed learning about the laws related to special education, so she changed her major and received her degree in special education. Her first teaching assignment was in an inclusion classroom in 2004, but after an unexpected move the next year, she found herself accepting a position as a special education teacher at a maximum security correctional facility which she described as both *really, really, really scary* and *an opportunity to do good instruction* from one of the *most restrictive environments*. After a few years in that position and another move, she accepted a position at a high school specifically for students with severe emotional and behavioral disabilities that she

qualified as another *fairly restrictive environment* with its own set of unique *challenges* and *opportunities*. The goal for the students was to always help them learn strategies to manage their behaviors so that they could return back to their traditional, less restrictive, school environments.

After over a decade of working with students with criminal backgrounds and behavior disorders, Miss Honey accepted her current position as a middle school teacher for students with severe and profound intellectual disabilities (SID/PID). In her third year as a SID/PID teacher, her current class at Spring Hill Middle School is made up of a handful of students who at times present with serious *medical fragility, exhaustion*, and unpredictable behavioral outbursts that require her to do far more than just teach language arts, math, science, and social studies. She teaches her students for their entire middle school experience as sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. On the day that Miss Honey and I first met, she experienced an outburst from one of her students that involved a soiled diaper being thrown at her head. During all of our conversations, I was impressed by Miss Honey's positivity, resolve, and love for her students.

Miss Honey's perspective about inclusion was shaped by the fact that she started teaching special education in public schools in 2004, right after the introduction of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 into public schools. The legislation expected students with severe disabilities to participate in high-stakes testing and school accountability measures, which meant a shift from functional curriculum to a more typical academic and standards-based curriculum. She remembers it as a chaotic time for education where *everybody was scared, running in a million different directions*, but within that chaos, something changed for students in special education. She remarked that it was interesting to see when students with disabilities were mandated to be included *how many students in those first few years were able to accomplish so much more than what was previously asked of them*. Fast forward to today where inclusion is something that *now*

we just expect it, and this is just our world that we live in—that of course our students in special ed[ucation] are out in the world and interacting and doing things. Of course they are, but there was a time when it wasn't, and I remember it. She explained how this sometimes one-way directional way that inclusion works, where students with severe disabilities are included, is an incomplete way of thinking about inclusion because it does not ensure that the *general population* recognizes *how much our kids can do and how much they have to offer, and how truly valuable they are.*

Meet Michelle

Michelle took a less traditional path becoming a special education teacher. She started in the field of education as a *prevention intervention specialist* who worked with high school students with behavioral issues, teaching them *strategies and tactics to not get in trouble*. After a few years in that position, she spent a year as a *substitute teacher* where she was explored *where, as far as elementary, middle, high school, she wanted to teach*. She moved to the southern United States and spent two years as an international flight attendant before returning to the classroom as a preschool teacher, second grade teacher, and then moved into her current position as a moderate intellectual disabilities (MOID) teacher at Lincoln High School. Michelle has been at Lincoln High School for over four years and primarily teaches the junior and senior students. Michelle's love for her job as an MOID teacher is infectious, and throughout our interviews, I thoroughly enjoyed listening to her stories and laughing with her. She wanted her classroom to be *a place where kids want to go* and believed that creating successful classrooms requires *a lot of love...before you can even start teaching*. She felt strongly about teachers taking self-contained special education positions for the wrong reasons, and the negative effect that could have on the students, reiterating that *if you don't love our babies, don't teach our babies*.

Our conversations extended beyond my questions into other areas and topics that she felt were also important and impacted her ability to be successful at her work, such as having strong relationships with fellow teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals. She believed that *a great para[professional] can make or break your year*. Her dedication to her students and strong work ethic at times drove off paraprofessionals, and some would *cry not to come* to her class. Michelle believed it was important that administrators know how to pair *strong teachers* with *strong paraprofessionals* and *weaker teachers paired with weaker paraprofessionals* because *somebody's gonna have to toughen up*. She said that *if you put a strong para[professional] with a weak teacher*, or vice versa, one will inevitably do *all the work*.

When I asked Michelle about becoming a special education teacher, she told me a story about her time as a prevention intervention specialist and how there was an MOID class down the hall from her. Every time she walked past the classroom, she sensed the joy and happiness of the students. She recalled the smell of them cooking breakfast each morning, and she could tell that the students *loved coming to school*. She knew that it was her *dream job*. At the end of our initial conversation though, Michelle told me a more personal story about why being a special education teacher was important to her.

When Michelle was in high school, she was the *captain of my cheerleading team*. One day, Michelle was *getting on a bus* to go cheer at a basketball game. As she was sitting down, she noticed a childhood friend at the front of the bus. This childhood friend had a disability and looked physically different from her peers. Michelle pretended like she did not know this childhood friend and settled in a seat towards the back of the bus, but the childhood friend would not stop turning around and looking at Michelle. Some of the basketball players took notice of the girl and started mocking her, saying things like *'what is that ugly girl looking at'* and *'why*

don't she just turn around.' She described it as a *spectacle on the bus, and I remember they started throwing things at her, and I felt like I didn't know what to do, you know, I was a popular girl, so I could have stopped it, but I didn't want to associate myself with her because she looked different, and she was different.* Michelle felt stuck, unsure of what to do, but also drawn to protect her childhood friend. She ended up staying silent and when getting off the bus, she said that *I could not give her eye contact because I felt so horrible.*

When she got home, she told her mother what happened, and instead of comforting her, her mother gave her some tough love. She told Michelle that she was a *coward* but that *the best thing about being a coward is you are going to remember that feeling for the rest of your life, and you are not going to ever want to feel that way again.* Years later when Michelle was an international flight attendant, she saw a little girl with special needs board the plane, and it reminded her of the moment on the bus when she did not stick up for her friend. She decided in that moment to retire her flight attendant wings and pursue a career as a special education teacher. Teaching her students now feels in a way to her like *righting a wrong* from the past and being able to protect and advocate for her students the way she should have done on the bus that day.

Subjectivity and Positionality

Research cannot be objective because researchers are not neutral. Researchers and participants are shaped by their life experiences and personal identities. The way I approach my research study is informed by my subjectivities and my positionality. In this section, I define both terms and describe their role in my study.

Subjectivities

My subjectivities, whether unconscious or conscious, influence the decisions that I make throughout the research process. Peshkin (1988) recommends actively seeking out subjectivities

that he describes as “the warm and cool spots, the emergence of positive and negative feelings, the experiences I wanted more of or wanted to avoid, and when I felt moved to act in roles beyond those necessary to fulfill my research needs” (p. 18). I must make every attempt to acknowledge my subjectivities throughout the research process because, just like a sieve, all of the data that I collect gets filtered and mediated through me. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) describe qualitative research as a “particular rendering or interpretation of reality grounded in the empirical world” (p. 27). I approach the study from a constructive epistemological stance, so I cannot claim that the data that I collect is the absolute Truth, nor can I be an independent bystander of the research. My background as a low-incidence special education teacher and the experiences I have in that role shape my identity and provide a unique lens for examining the practices of other low-incidence special education teachers. My personal beliefs about the importance of students with severe disabilities belonging within their school communities directed me toward my research topic and shaped my interest in knowing what other teachers think about inclusion and how they advocate for their students within their own school context. Peshkin (1988) recommends periodically examining subjectivities throughout the research process so that subjectivities do not turn into blatant biases.

I utilized my researcher journal throughout the process of collecting and analyzing data to reflect on my connections and tensions with what Miss Honey, Lindsey, and Michelle shared with me. I maintained handwritten and typed journal entries because at times thoughts would come to me, and I needed different ways to process them. My typed journal entries were more often to be elaborate streams of consciousness where I would address a tension, reflect on how my experience was different than the participant, and work through the tension to come to some sort of resolve. My handwritten entries included analytic memos about patterns that I was seeing

between the participants or in relation to a selection of text from Gloria Anzaldúa. I used both journals as a safe space for me to explore my warm and cold spots (Peshkin, 1988). In the next section, I introduce myself as a teacher in a similar way that I introduced the three participants. As I co-construct narratives, it is important that I explain how my narrative beginnings shape my connection to this study.

Meet Rebecca

In 2005, I was a sophomore in high school, and I was certain that I was going to be a high school mathematics or history teacher. I decided on a university that had a great education program, and I was saving babysitting money for tuition. I would brush off anyone who tried to tell me to consider other options because I knew what I was going to do. That same year, my friend Bekah wanted to volunteer for Friends Club which was a club specifically for students to socialize during their lunch period with students in the self-contained special education classes. She asked me to go with her, and only thinking of myself and how great it would look on my college resume, I said yes. We started volunteering in a moderate intellectual disability (MOID) class, but there were too many volunteers at that time, so we were asked to switch over to the severe and profound intellectual disability (SID/PID) class. I recall being nervous about the change because I did not really understand what ‘severe and profound’ meant. The day we were supposed to switch, I still went to the MOID class, but Bekah went to the SID/PID class. She came running to me during class change and yelled, “The teacher brought her dog, and the dog had puppies! That was the best experience ever, and the students are so sweet. You have to come with me tomorrow!”

For the rest of my sophomore year as well as my junior and senior years of high school, I never witnessed puppies born in the SID/PID class, but what I found was much better—I found

friendship, belonging, and community. I looked forward to any and every time I could sneak away to the SID/PID class, whether it was before school, after school, or during my lunch period. By my senior year, I was the president of Friends Club, and for my senior project, I planned an inclusive variety show where the general education peers supported students from the self-contained classes in singing, dancing, and even magic show acts. Outside of school, I helped run a camp for youth with disabilities through the local recreation center; I provided respite care so that parents could have a night out or a weekend away; and most importantly, I abandoned my stubborn career plans and began looking into special education teacher preparation programs.

I am presently in my eighth year of teaching special education, and fourth as a MOID elementary school teacher for third, fourth, and fifth grade students. I often think back to how volunteering for Friends Club shaped so much of my adolescent and early adult life. My perception of inclusion was more centered around me being accepted by the students and teaching staff in the self-contained class than what academic subjects the students with severe disabilities attended with their general education peers. Inclusion was about the community that existed in that self-contained class that accommodated and welcomed all with and without disabilities.

My current students do not have the same opportunities for interacting with their peers like the students in the SID/PID class in my high school had. Class schedules are too inflexible, and the looming end of year assessments further restrict opportunities, but I carry the hope of what could be possible for my students because I once lived it.

Positionality

Sultana (2007) defines positionality as “how one relates to research participants and what can/cannot be done vis-à-vis the research within the context of institutional, social, and political realities” (p. 376). Because qualitative research is subjective, my status as an insider or outsider

to the group I study informs my perspectives about that group. Scholars use the terms *emic* and *etic* to describe how a researcher can be an insider and/or outsider within the context of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). When a researcher holds an emic status within the group, it can be easier to establish trust and rapport with the participants. If a researcher is an etic to the group, the participants may feel as if the researcher has an agenda or is doing research on the participants, not with the participants. Johnson-Bailey (2004) explains that the researcher's status as an emic or etic is fluid and changes throughout the process because one can never fully be an insider to another person's experiences. She describes how power plays a role in positionality because the researcher holds power in what is done with the data after the participants relinquish it to the researcher.

I view my positionality as both an emic and etic. I am a low-incidence special education teacher who wants to learn from other low-incidence special education teachers in the same district. I understand firsthand the district policies, curricular expectations, and assessment mandates that influence my decision-making process. I attend the same professional development sessions that the district hosts on teacher workdays, and I have access to the same curricular resources the district provides to all low-incidence teachers to use in the classroom. Although I share insider status in these ways, I do not work directly with any of the participants or their students, so I can never fully be an insider of their teaching context. My positionality as an emic helps me establish a shared discourse with my participants, but the stories and perspectives that each participant shares is reflecting of his or her own unique construction of their experience teaching students with severe disabilities.

I felt as if I established rapport with Michelle, Lindsey, and Miss Honey, and they accepted my emic status as a fellow low-incidence special education teacher. When I was

transcribing the interviews, I recognized moments where I, as the researcher, should have asked a follow-up question or should have asked the participant to elaborate more, but I, as the special education teacher, understood what they were describing without the follow-up. I wrote memos to myself of topics I needed to clarify with the participant at the next interview, sharing of interim text, or through email so that I could be certain that my understanding of what the teacher said and what the teacher meant were in alignment.

Methods of Data Collection

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) wrote that narrative inquiry is a relational process. The researcher and the participant co-construct data, which they term as *field text*. I collected a variety of field text while interacting with my participants. In this section, I describe the process I took collecting field text, including my narrative beginnings, interviews, document collection, researcher journal, and transcription of interviews and field notes. I describe the plans I had for observing my participants, but how COVID-19 and the forced closure of schools impacted my ability to observe.

Narrative Beginnings and Researcher Journal

Clandinin (2013) encourages narrative inquirers to write their own autobiographical narrative before beginning a study as a way of exploring their own experiences, memories, and rationale for engaging in the research study. By framing the reflection as a narrative, the researcher can begin to conceptualize the importance and power of narratives as a way to represent data. Anzaldúa would describe narrative beginnings as an autohistoria where I, as the researcher, reflect on my life-history with special focus on the topic at hand. Earlier in this chapter, I introduced myself and my narrative beginnings in connection to my identity and subjectivities as a special education teacher. In the next chapter, I expound upon my autohistoria in connection to each theme.

My narrative did not end when I started collecting data from my participants. I maintained a researcher journal throughout the data collection process to reflect on my experiences throughout the process as a way to turn inward and reflect on the outside events (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The journal was a place for myself as the researcher to reflect on my own puzzling of the experiences in the field, explore patterns in my thinking, and draft analytic memos.

I maintained two journals, an electronic journal on my computer and handwritten journal in a notebook. My electronic journal was the place where I spent the most time troubling my own thoughts and working through tensions and connections. I reflected on advocacy and explored in my electronic journal the ways in which the special education teachers displayed advocacy in their actions. My handwritten journal was where I made analytic memos about how the data connected to Anzaldúa's theories, emerging patterns and categories, and operational definitions. I drew out webs and diagrams of connections between participants in the handwritten journal. Before I analyzed a piece of data, I would read a short selection of Anzaldúa's writings. In my handwritten journal, I maintained a log of what Anzaldúa text I read in connection to what piece I was analyzing and any connections that I saw between what Anzaldúa wrote and what the participants and I discussed.

Initial Conversation

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe the importance of having conversations with participants aside from official interviews. Conversations create a space for "equality among participants" and the researcher by allowing the participants to establish topics of discussion (p. 109). Because I did not have prior relationships with any of the participants, it was important for me to establish trust and rapport with my participants at the beginning of our shared inquiry process. I scheduled a time to meet with each participant for the initial conversation after we

reviewed the informed consent. I began the conversation by asking the participants to tell me about themselves, their background in special education, and their current class to initiate the conversation; but beyond that, I let the participant direct the flow and topics discussed. Clandinin and Connelly stated that it is important for the researcher to actively listen to the participant and avoid writing field notes. I audio-recorded the conversation for later transcription and wrote field notes after the conversation ended about my initial responses to the conversation, items that I wanted to follow-up on at the next interview, and points that resonated with me. I transcribed the initial conversation and included it with the other field text during the analysis process.

Interviews

Researchers employ different types of interview structures, including structured, semi-structured, and unstructured, based on the purpose of the interview (Roulston, 2010). I used semi-structured interviews which are considered less rigid than structured interviews; but unlike unstructured interviews, they do follow a general interview protocol. Riessman (1993) recommended developing an interview protocol with five to seven broad, open-ended questions to encourage the participant to have more control over what is discussed. I listened intently and ask follow-up questions to clarify and extend on what the participant said. I audio-recorded the interviews, and then I transcribed the audio verbatim (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

I interviewed each participant twice, and our interviews ranged from 40-minutes to an hour each time. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and forced school closure, I held these interviews virtually from my home. During the first interview, I asked each participant to bring a photograph or image that represents their approach to inclusion and another that represents their conceptualization of high-quality instruction for their students. Miss Honey and Lindsey sent me photographs, and Michelle sent me hand-drawn pictures. I framed the interview around these images and asked the participants to describe the images in the context of their students'

educational experiences (see Appendix B for interview one protocol). A photograph “marks a special memory in our time, a memory around which we construct stories” that “can be triggers to our memories” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 114). By using a photo-elicited interview, I encouraged my participants to share these stories, emotions, and experiences connected to the images.

I developed an interim text of the initial data analysis for each participant based on the initial conversation and the first interview that I shared with each participant to review to member check. During the second interview, I planned to have the participants to take me on a walking tour of their school building where the participants would share inclusive experiences their students have and how the participants help foster these opportunities (see Appendix C for interview two protocol). Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were closed, and it was impossible for me to hold this walking tour in the schools. The second interview, like the first, took place virtually, and the teachers talked through places where their students have access, what activities their students do in these places, and what role the teachers played in advocating for that access. During this interview, I also collected instructional materials from the participants, such as sample lessons on PowerPoint, and ask them to explain the significance of the artifacts. After analyzing this data in connection to the previous interview and initial conversation, I shared an additional interim text with each participant that was a closer approximation to the final research text.

Transcription

For each participant, I had three transcripts: one for the initial conversation and two interviews. Although it would be easier and more convenient to pay for an outside company to transcribe my audio-recordings, I believed it was important to immerse myself in the data collection process at every step, so I transcribed each interview verbatim. I followed Riessman’s

(1993) recommendation to start with a rough draft transcription to get all of the audio on paper and then re-transcribe certain sections that contain long stories. I found myself to be a bit of a perfectionist at certain points of the transcribing process where I would listen and relisted to a selection repeatedly to ensure that I was accurately capturing every word verbatim. At times, I would stop transcribing and need to journal about a certain topic and then return to the transcription. By the time I began the analysis process, I felt like I knew the transcripts and audio inside and out. I heard the voices of Miss Honey, Michelle, and Lindsey as I read through the transcripts. I printed out each transcript so that I could easily revisit the text throughout the analysis and drafting of interim text process. I planned to upload the transcripts into NVivo 12 software, but my license provided by the university expired, and with the COVID-19 pandemic, I was not able to renew it as the university was closed. A graduate student colleague recommended using Quirkos, and after a trial of the software, I found it to be user friendly, so I utilized it for the thematic analysis stage of the analysis process.

Observations

I originally planned to observe each participant once in her classroom for a 45-minute to one-hour time period (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). I wanted to schedule each observation during a time that the participants were most comfortable with me coming into their school and observing. I planned to observe the teachers delivering instruction in their classroom; a time when their students are engaged in an inclusive activity within the school; or both an instructional and inclusive time (see Appendix D for observation guide).

I was not able to hold these observations, as previously stated, because of the school closures related to COVID-19. Schools in Watt County were shut down from mid-March 2020 through the end of the school year, and when people were allowed to re-enter the buildings, most schools had strict guidelines for limiting the number of people and amount of time in the

building. While each of the teachers were holding virtual class sessions during this time, I believed it would be inappropriate for me to join in on these sessions and would not provide me with the same kind of observational opportunity that I hoped to have in the physical classroom. As I was unable to observe the participants in their school contexts, I relied more heavily on the documents that they shared with me as a glimpse into what instruction looked like for their students each day. In the second interview, I asked each teacher to walk me through their instructional materials and what a typical day in their class looked like, including the instructional websites that they utilized outside of the provided curriculum. Additionally, Miss Honey provided me with a voiceover PowerPoint that she shared with her students during the school closure that was directly modeled after how she presented her in-person instruction and the link to her website where she uploaded instructional materials that her students could access while learning from home.

Collection of Documents and Artifacts

During the second interview, I asked the participants to provide instructional materials, including lesson plans and examples of activities. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state that as a researcher, I must decide what documents are relevant to the narrative inquiry. I wanted to collect documents that I believed reflect the participants' use of high-quality instruction, so I want to review documents that highlighted their choices of learning activities and instructional practices. By collecting these primary documents and artifacts, I was able to see with my own eyes the participant's approaches to teaching and delivering high-quality instruction for their students (Patton, 2015). Because I was not able to observe my participants, the collection of artifacts was an important step to understanding what the teachers' instruction looked like for their students.

Michelle's Artifacts

Michelle showed me her instructional resources in our second interview, but she did not elect to email me any of the physical copies of documents that she uses. She utilizes the district-provided curriculum, Unique Learning System (ULS), which has its own lesson plans and pacing guides built into the monthly lessons. She took me through a sample literacy lesson where she displayed the book from the ULS unit onto her classroom interactive board. She opened the lesson with a picture walk throughout the book where she asked her students to make predictions about the story, and then she went back to the beginning of the book and read the story to her students. She would then break up her students into smaller groups, and Michelle and her paraprofessional would lead different vocabulary and comprehension activities from the ULS unit. In mathematics, her lessons primarily focus on addition, subtraction, number recognition, 1:1 correspondence, money, and time. She utilizes ULS for math word problems to review addition and subtraction as a class, and then she reinforces those skills in smaller groups.

Michelle used high school appropriate websites, such as CNN-10 and BrainPop, to introduce and review academic subjects, but she also utilized one website geared towards younger students called ABC Mouse. She used CNN-10 and BrainPop in whole group lessons, and then also had BrainPop as a choice during a 15-minute independent computer time. ABC Mouse was also a choice for the 15-minute independent computer time. She reiterated that although ABC Mouse was for younger students, it helped review some of her students IEP goals that were more foundational academic skills that they still, in high school, had not mastered. For high school students, ULS has a Transition Passport that Michelle incorporated throughout the day in her classroom. The Transition Passport included lessons that helped students plan events and explore post-graduation interests.

Miss Honey's Artifacts

Miss Honey provided me with two voiceover PowerPoints that she shared with her students during the school closure that modeled how she presented her in-person instruction. In these PowerPoints, she recorded herself reading a News-2-You article, asking comprehension questions, introducing vocabulary words, reviewing counting skills, and providing behavioral reinforcements. News-2-You is part of the ULS curriculum that was provided to Miss Honey by the district to use. One PowerPoint was targeted towards her students who require errorless choices and more simplified instruction, and the other PowerPoint was used with her students who could handle having a field of two or three answer choices.

Miss Honey also sent the link to her website where she uploaded instructional materials that her students could access while learning from home. On this website, she provided links to instructional websites that, like Michelle, are designed for younger students but are foundational skills that her students are still learning. She also included books from the ULS library and videos of herself creating snacks and crafts that they would do as a class if school had not closed for in-person learning. She provided a list of materials that she used for mathematics counting instruction.

Lindsey's Artifacts

Lindsey used the ULS lesson plan and pacing guide that was required by the district, but she elected to send me a sample lesson plan from the school year before ULS was adopted. In previous years, Lindsey used the website Planbook for her lesson plans. The lesson plan recorded the academic standard, opening, activity, closing, modifications, and links to websites for each academic subject. Lindsey utilized the BrainPop Junior website, Starfall, and instructional YouTube videos for lessons, which in elementary school are considered age appropriate. Lindsey

sent me pictures of file folders that she used during her morning circle time for students to answer questions about how many students were in attendance, what the weather was, and what information goes on the calendar. She also sent me the SmartNotebook file that she displayed for the class as they went through the morning circle time lesson.

Lindsey also sent me three sample science PowerPoints and one sample mathematics lesson for units of measurement. Each of these presentations were filled with visuals that related to students' personal experiences with the topic, simplified academic language, and some also included embedded links for YouTube videos that reviewed the information.

Methods of Data Analysis

My research questions helped guide my exploration of (a) how the special education teachers plan and implement high-quality instruction for their students and (b) how the special education teachers facilitate inclusive opportunities for their students within the school community. Just as there is no one standardized approach to doing qualitative research, there is no standardized approach to analyzing narrative data. It was important for me to keep a record of my progress through the analysis phase so that I could account for my decisions and continually refine my thinking. My data collection and analysis processes were at times recursive with the completion of an interview, coding and drafting of interim text, and then conducting the next interview. Throughout the analysis process, I relied on analytic memos in my journal (Saldaña, 2016). Analytic memos were an important part of the analysis process, and I used them to maintain a close relationship with my data, exploring my assumptions, defining terms, and reflecting on emerging narrative threads.

Polkinghorne (1995) noted that analyzing the data is “not merely a transcription of the thoughts and actions of the protagonist; it is a means of making sense and showing the significance of them in the context” of the story (p. 19). After I completed an initial transcription

of the interviews, I listened to the audio-recording multiple times and ensured that my transcript represented the spoken features present in the audio (Riessman, 1993). I printed off the nine transcripts, one initial conversation and two interviews for each participant, so that I could have a readily available physical copy. As I listened back to the audio-recordings with the transcripts, I made note of moments where I felt like the teachers were representing nepantlera or describing nos/otras. I also used sticky note tabs to mark moments in the transcripts that felt particularly significant or connected with something another participant spoke about in their interview. I highlighted quotes that resonated with me and also expounded on these points in my researcher journal of why they felt significant to me.

When I started applying a coding method to my transcripts, the participants words felt incredibly familiar. I felt like I could hear their voices and relive the conversation. Before I would sit down to perform any analysis, I always read a short selection of text from Anzaldúa. I read sections about nepantlera, nos/otras, and conocimiento from her collection of writings in the book *Light in the Dark/Luz en Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* which was edited by AnaLouise Keating (2015). I was working through this data in the midst of a pandemic and frequent protests calling for social justice. At times it was hard to focus my attention on the analysis because it felt like the rest of the world was on fire. Always starting with Anzaldúa's writings helped focus my attention on the work that I needed to do and made me feel like Anzaldúa was an active member of the dialogue that I was having with the analysis process.

I selected In Vivo Coding as my first cycle method of coding because I wanted to stay aligned to what the participants were saying. In Vivo Coding uses the exact words of the participants as the code. Saldaña (2016) describes two kinds of In Vivo Coding techniques: the splitter and the lumper. When coding as a splitter, "virtually every line of data gets its own code"

(p. 106) while coding as a lumpner, a code is applied for every few sentences. I hand coded the print transcripts because it felt like a more natural way for me to carry out this coding process. I favored coding as a splitter, and the initial In Vivo Coding produced hundreds of codes, written out by hand. Writing the interim texts helped me zoom out my focus from the words and phrases that I coded into the larger context of the stories the participants were telling. I used the In Vivo Codes from the transcripts of the initial conversation and first interview to retell each teachers' introductions, at least one prominent story, and how I felt the participants connected to Anzaldúa's theories of nepantlera and nos/otras. In the interim text, I also connected their experiences to my own personal autohistoria. After I drafted the first set of interim texts, I shared those interim texts with the participants, and then I used In Vivo Coding for the second interview transcripts. After I completed all In Vivo Code analysis for the nine transcripts, I developed five major categories that were the foundation for the next round of coding: thematic analysis. These categories included instruction as an aid to inclusion, opportunities and resources, relationships that support inclusion, characteristics of instruction, and perceptions of outsiders that influenced the teachers' actions and advocacy.

Braun and Clarke (2006) defined thematic analysis as a method for recognizing patterns, or themes, within the data. They outlined six phases of thematic analysis that include (1) familiarizing myself with the data, (2) forming initial codes, (3) searching the data for themes, (4) reviewing the themes, (5) defining the themes, and (6) creating a final report. I completed phase one through my transcribing and relistening to the audio-transcripts, and I completed phase two with the first cycle In Vivo Coding and drafting of interim text. Through my journaling and memos as well as my feedback from the sharing of interim text with my participants, I developed five basic categories in phase three. I preloaded the five categories in the Quirkos coding

software, and then I reread and analyzed the nine transcripts through the Quirkos software. This time as I read the transcripts, I shifted my thinking away from “What are the teachers saying?” toward a different perspective of “What does what the teacher is saying mean in terms of the categories?” I followed Riessman’s (2004) guidance of thematic narrative analysis to place a greater emphasis on what the participant said as opposed to how the participant said it. In Quirkos, I would highlight a selection of text and drag it into either one of the five established categories, or if I felt that the selection was important but did not fit into one of those five, I created a new category. I ended this phase of analysis with twelve categories, but I also recognized that some of these categories were interconnected or did not necessarily address my specific research questions. For instance, I had 18 codes related to how others in the district assisted the teachers with instruction, and while this category captured interesting points by the participants that could be considered in future studies, they did not directly relate to my specific research questions.

I moved into a phase somewhere between three and four where I recognized that I needed to narrow down the categories into specific, definable themes. In my handwritten researcher journal, I drew a web of how I saw the categories connecting with each other and telling an overall story of Michelle, Lindsey, and Miss Honey’s experiences and perceptions of inclusion and high-quality instruction. While each participant had different individual experiences, there were narrative threads that connected those experiences together into definable themes. The narrative threads were moments within the participants’ accounts that wove the narratives together and echoed across the participants’ experiences (Clandinin, 2013). I used my handwritten journal to draft different theme statements and considered how the participants experiences and perspectives supported those theme statements. Through this process of drafting

and redrafting, I identified three major themes: (1) Special education teachers use high-quality instruction to engage their students in real-world learning experiences; (2) Special education teachers use high-quality instruction to challenge perceptions others have about what their students are capable of achieving; and (3) Special education teachers encounter barriers when attempting to sustain inclusive opportunities. I continually revisited the transcripts and audio-recordings, my interim texts, my researcher journal, and Anzaldúa's writings to construct the final interim text. This final interim text listed the theme, the opening definition and my autohistoria, and the individual participant's narratives that supported that theme. I shared that interim text with each participant and then used their feedback to construct the final research text that also included my personal connection to the theme and how the themes connected to Anzaldúa's theories of *nepantlera* and *nos/otras*.

Because I was not able to hold observations, I relied more heavily on my interviews and subsequent transcripts to guide my analysis, but the documents that each participant shared with me also served to confirm my understanding of the teachers' instructional practices. I saw examples of lesson plans, websites that the teachers used to supplement instruction, and PowerPoint presentations of introductory lessons that previewed learning objectives and important vocabulary. The documents confirmed that the teachers' instructional practices were aligned to the research around high-quality instruction and supported my first theme that the special education teachers use high-quality instruction to engage their students in real-world learning experiences. The instructional materials were related to real-life experiences of the students, pulled in a vast array of visual supports, and mostly aligned with academic standards for respective grades or addressed prerequisite skills that established the foundation for those grade-level academic standards and skills.

Ethical Considerations

I faced ethical considerations throughout the process of recruiting participants, collecting data, analyzing, and representing findings. During the recruitment process, I asked a district supervisor for access to their list of perceived teacher experts, so the supervisor was aware of who was a potential participant. The supervisor did not serve in any kind of evaluative role of the teachers, so there was minimal risk in asking the supervisors for recommendations, but building administrators, who do serve as evaluators, did also have to consent to a teacher from their school participating. I did not directly share the names of the participants who I was recruiting with the administrators, but it would not be difficult to narrow down who was participating if there was only one or two self-contained classes in their school building. I ensured that participants knew that once they consent to being part of the study, their identities remained anonymous. I gave the option to each participant to pick their own pseudonym. Only one made a request, but the other two approved of my choices.

In connection to my researcher positionality, I also considered the ethical concern of taking the stories of participants, analyzing them, and reconstructing them. I informed my participants at the beginning of the data collection period that they had opportunities to review and member check my interim texts and ensure that I was representing their stories in a way that they believed were reflective of their experiences. Each interim text was specific to that participant, so I did not share information about one participant with another.

Delimitations

I elected to delimit the study in a few ways. I collect data after securing Georgia State University and Watt County School District Institutional Review Board approval from March 2020 through May 2020. I recruited three special education teachers from three different schools in Watt County School District. In my initial proposal, I had a very rushed timeline so that I

could finish by the graduation deadline. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world seemed to slow down. I used that time to also slow down my analysis process and take additional time to reflect, journal, and revisit all of the data repeatedly. I first learned of Gloria Anzaldúa and her theories of nepantlera and nos/otras in one of my classes through my doctoral program, so when I selected her framework for my study, I was still a relatively novice scholar of her work. When I waited for the IRB approval, I read an edited book of her writings, and I continually revisited that text throughout my analysis process so I could make every attempt at appropriately using her theories to help guide my thinking about my research.

Limitations

Limitations differ from delimitations because limitations are beyond my control. Because I needed administrative approval for teachers to participate in my study, there were potentially two additional teachers who might have been interested in participating, but I was not able to ask them because the administrators did not approve a study taking place with their staff. The COVID-19 pandemic caused me to cancel my observations because school stopped taking place in-person in the middle of March. The interviews with each participant took place virtually from the participants' homes after they were physically away from their students for at least a week or two. Each participant would occasionally remark that they did not remember what they did when they were in-person. The time away from the classroom made them sometimes share what they were doing through virtual learning without elaborating as much on what would typically take place when students were physically present in the classroom. By using narrative inquiry methodology, I collected stories that represent a specific moment in the participants' lives. Narrative inquiry uses storytelling to "put shards of experience together, to (re)construct identity, community, and tradition, if only temporarily" (Casey, 1995, p. 216). Each story was unique to its context, and the participants' perspectives about their stories can change in an instant,

especially in the midst of a pandemic. During the first step of my thematic analysis, I elected to use In Vivo Code analysis where the participants words were the codes. The choice to use this coding technique limited the possible codes that I was able to develop.

Trustworthiness

Because of the individualized nature of qualitative data, results are rarely, if ever, generalizable to the wider population. Instead of generalizability, qualitative researchers seek to represent their findings in a manner that is trustworthy by addressing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In this section, I describe how I addressed these four facets of trustworthiness. Credibility relates to the internal validity of the study and how the findings of the study relate to reality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I collected a variety of data sources, including interviews and documents to have a multidimensional view of the data. I asked the participants to share instructional materials with me, but the participants elected what artifacts of theirs to share with me. I utilized member checks to ensure that the participants validated my interpretations of their experiences and perspectives. Transferability relate to the external validity which is generally believed to be unachievable by qualitative researchers (Patton, 2015). Because Watt County School District has pockets of diversity and socioeconomic variation, it was especially hard for me to achieve transferability in my findings; however, I addressed this by looking for participants that were from different regions within the district. I developed a purposeful selection criterion based on Palmer et al. (2005) to recruit expert teachers. Dependability and confirmability relate to the reliable nature of the study. Because qualitative studies are exploring phenomena and perspectives, they inherently cannot be replicated and yield consistent results (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As a researcher, I ensured that I addressed the dependability and confirmability of my study by ensuring that the data that I collect was consistent with the findings that I describe. I utilized both of my researcher journals during the

data collection and analysis processes to actively reflect on my role as a researcher and my interpretations and experiences collecting and analyzing data.

In the next chapter, I expound upon the three themes that I yielded from my analysis. I share the narratives of participants that guided my arrival at the themes as well as my personal autohistoria and the connections between the narratives and Anzaldúa's theories of *nos/otras* and *nepantlera*.

4 FINDINGS

In this study, I examined the perspectives and experiences of three special education teachers who teach students with severe disabilities in self-contained classrooms. I explored (a) how the special education teachers plan and implement high-quality instruction for their students and (b) how the special education teachers facilitate inclusive opportunities for their students within the school community. The purpose of my study was to examine the ways that low-incidence special education teachers engage in educationally inclusive practices and high-quality instruction as well as how they reflect and perceive these processes. I collected data from an initial conversation, two semi-structured interviews, and teachers' artifacts. I developed transcripts of the initial conversation and interviews, and then I analyzed the data using In Vivo coding, thematic coding, constructing interim text, and sharing that interim text with the participants as a form of member checking. I maintained a researcher journal throughout the process of data collection and analysis where I wrote memos and reflections throughout the process. Gloria Anzaldúa's theories of *nepantlera* and *nos/otras* provided a framework for me as I engaged in this inquiry process. From the analysis, I identified three major themes: (1) Special education teachers use high-quality instruction to engage their students in real-world learning experiences; (2) Special education teachers use high-quality instruction to challenge perceptions others have about what their students are capable of achieving; and (3) Special education teachers encounter barriers when attempting to sustain inclusive opportunities. In this chapter, I begin the discussion of each theme with a short autohistoria in the tradition of Anzaldúa to help the reader consider the context and perspective of a special education teacher. Then, I define the theme, share accounts of each participant that informed the theme, explore my shared positionality with the participants' experiences, and draw a connection between the participants' experiences and Anzaldúa's theories.

Theme One: Instruction to Engage Students in Real-World Learning Experiences

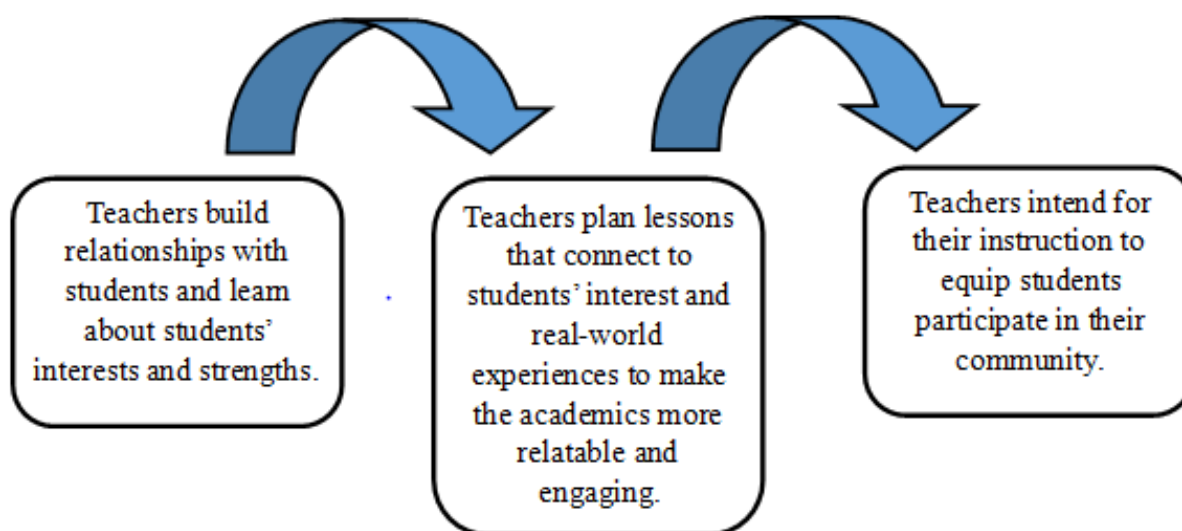
Imagine for a moment that you are a special education teacher for students with severe disabilities. You teach a modified academic curriculum that consists of grade-level standards and prerequisite skills related to the academic standards. You start a new unit on fractions, and you begin with the vocabulary—numerator, denominator, part of a whole, half, fourths. Your students stare at you blankly, or worse, they start engaging in negative behaviors. They have no connection to the words that you are using or the skills that you are trying to deposit into their head. You think back to your college courses and recall that one professor who railed against the ‘banking method of teaching’ where the role of the teacher was to deposit the information into the minds of the students, and the students should sit quietly, without question, and accept that information into their bank of knowledge. What did that professor propose instead of banking education? He introduced you to Paulo Freire, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and the notion that instruction should be connected to students’ personal experiences and cultural backgrounds. He reminded you of Lev Vygotsky and the importance of scaffolding instruction where you meet students where they are at academically, and your instruction helps move the students closer and closer to the ultimate goal. You feel the tension between the need to teach isolated, prerequisite skills and the need to connect your instruction to something tangible that your students find relatable and engaging. What is the purpose of teaching isolated skills if your students have no connection to them?

Miss Honey, Lindsey, and Michelle used instructional methods intended to help their students connect the academic topics to real-world experiences, including the things that the students see and experience in their homes and community outside of school. They took time to build relationships with their students and learn what their students enjoyed. The special education teachers planned lessons that were connected to the students’ interests and experiences

to make the academic standards more relatable and engaging (see Figure 1). Their lessons connected the students' personal interests to academics taught in the classroom, and the teachers sought for their instruction to equip students to engage in their community. The teachers' instruction made the community more familiar and therefore more accessible for their students.

Figure 1

Model of Theme One



Miss Honey's Instruction

Miss Honey's middle school students had a variety of medical needs and behaviors that influenced how she was able to approach instruction in her class. At times it was challenging to keep her students *interactive all day*, especially *during those times of illness* when her students would get exhausted quickly. Miss Honey believed that the best kind of instruction for her students went *across learning styles* and included *the visual, the auditory, the kinesthetic, and the tactile*. She wanted her lessons to be able to be generalized outside of her classroom so that her students were able to have *deeper interactions* and connect what they were learning in the classroom to experiences around the school building and out in the community. She understood that her students at times were limited with what they could accomplish in a day, and she was

responsive to those needs while still maintaining *higher expectations* than what was previously expected of them.

During our first interview, Miss Honey explained that her school holds assemblies and pep rallies at least twice a month. One of her students, Emma (pseudonym), in particular loves attending these events, but some of Emma's classmates were less enthusiastic about participating. Miss Honey developed a *social story* about her students going to the assembly and buying a bag of chips from the concession stand to help her class prepare for what they were going to experience at the assembly. Her students loved listening to stories in class as part of their daily English Language Arts (ELA) instruction. Miss Honey knew that her students need repetitive exposure to instruction, so the social story about going to the concession stand stayed *in their rotation of regular stories* that were read to the students. Reading the social story was not only done in preparation for the assembly, but it was *incorporated into our daily lessons* and part of the *normal conversation* so that Miss Honey could say to her students that *we're not about to do this, but we're going to talk about how great you are at it*.

Before going to the assembly, the class read the social story and talked through what to expect. Miss Honey also developed a *visual schedule* of the steps that her students follow to select and pay for a preferred bag of chips that mirrored the social story. While her students waited for their turn at the concession stand, she gave the volunteer running the stand a copy of the visual schedule. The volunteer referenced Miss Honey's visual schedule when the students took their turn buying chips. Because the volunteer follows the predictable steps on the visual schedule, Miss Honey's students were able to *go through the steps pretty gracefully*, and the volunteer did not have to rely on Miss Honey to moderate the activity because the visual schedule provided that information (see Figure 2). The students were able to engage with

someone from their school community that they might not otherwise get the opportunity to interact with in a positive and productive way because Miss Honey's social story prepared them for what to expect and made the experience feel familiar. Her students then ate the chips *in the gym lobby with the rest of the kids [...] like everybody else.*

Figure 2

Miss Honey's Class Purchases Chips from Concession Stand at School Assembly



The social story and visual schedule helped make the experience at the assembly familiar and predictable for Miss Honey's students. As Miss Honey's students learned the steps to buying a preferred item in the school setting, she planned opportunities to purchase items in the community on Community Based Instruction (CBI) trips to restaurants and the mall, and she encouraged her students' families to take them *into the community and [let them] make purchases.* She also introduced goals to their *transition plans* for purchasing items. They practiced purchasing items in the classroom during math, and then her students were able to learn that *we pay money for a snack at the vending machine and the concession stand, the mall, and at*

ice cream with my family. She used these different inclusive opportunities to help her students generalize purchasing items across a variety of settings. Miss Honey made sure that part of any purchasing activity included the presentation of choices, so her students were also learning how to express their opinion and select their preferred item. Miss Honey recognized that often times her students were *accustomed to everybody doing everything for them*, and she wanted them to have the opportunity to be more autonomous with their decisions. Her high-quality instruction gave her students the ability to practice being more independent and expressing wants in real-world contexts.

Lindsey's Instruction

Lindsey believed that it was important to build connections between her students' *real-life experiences* and her instruction because it helped her third, fourth, and fifth grade students understand and engage better with the academics. She wanted her students to be able to go into their community and have a deeper understanding of what was around them. She taught lessons about *parts of the plant and what [plants] need to survive*, not just because it was an academic standard she was expected to teach, but also so that when her students went to the grocery store and found *a piece of kale, they can find the stem and leaves*, and when her students walked *around outside wherever they live and see the different plants in the ground and understand that 'oh these plants look like they're dying, and that's because they're in the shade, or they didn't get enough water.'* She intended for her students to be able to relate the instruction that they receive in the classroom to what they saw *outside in their real life*. Lindsey recognized that planning lessons related to students' *real-life experiences* could be challenging because *you really have to know the kids to know what they're seeing every day*. She took time to get to know her students and *know what they can do* and what they enjoy because she recognized that her students engaged in lessons *so much better when you can relate it to their real life*.

Lindsey used inclusive opportunities to generalize the academics that she was teaching in her classroom. She created a weekly coffee shop program to help raise money to fund field trips for the self-contained classes at her school. The coffee shop itself was an inclusive opportunity where her students and general education students worked together to sell breakfast items to the school staff (see Figure 3). When she started the coffee shop a few years ago, it was exclusively run by students and teachers from the self-contained classes. The teachers wanted the coffee shop to help their students work on social *greetings, introducing the items on our menu, taking orders, handling money, money exchange, and communication* with people outside of the self-contained classroom. Lindsey remarked that her students would *fight over who helps with the coffee cart on Friday*.

Figure 3

Coffee Cart for Weekly Coffee Shop at Lindsey's School



Lindsey's students attended specials classes, such as art, music, and STEAM, with a general education class every day. She noticed that many of the students in the general education class enjoyed *interacting* with her students. The general education students *would ask them to*

come sit with them at their table and do the activities together, and so she invited these students to assist with the coffee shop to give her students a chance to interact with their friends more because *you don't want them to interact just during specials*. The general education students helped with some of the physical tasks, like *pouring the juice into the cup, assisting with walkers, and helping with money*, as well as some of the verbal prompts that the teachers would normally provide. Lindsey's students had the opportunity to socialize and build relationships with their general education peers while having a real-world opportunity to practice the mathematics and communication skills that they learned in the self-contained classroom.

Lindsey used the coffee shop to *raise money to go on as many [field trips] as possible*, which further provided her students with opportunities to relate their learning in the classroom with experiences in their community. Because she taught at the elementary school level, it was typical for elementary-age students to go on field trips throughout the school year, and Lindsey took advantage of every field trip opportunity she could. Lindsey's students were learning about *modes of transportation* as well as *life and social skills* in public places, and so she arranged a field trip to the airport for her students and their parents. On the trip, the airport staff gave the group a tour of the airport, including the *sensory room that they have and all of the options they have for kids with special needs*. The students boarded one of the planes and were able to *go into the cockpit, get food and water*, and practice keeping their seatbelt on when the seatbelt sign was engaged. Lindsey explained that *a lot of them have never been on a plane before either, so that was a cool experience* for them to have for the first time to safely practice before going on a real trip where knowing the rules and expectations on a plane is incredibly important. Lindsey knew that her students were interested in animals, so on other occasions, she arranged field trips to the aquarium and the zoo to coincide with her science unit on animals and their habitats. The field

trips helped bring students' interests to life, and Lindsey was able to show the students places in their community where they could share their interests with others.

Michelle's Instruction

Michelle's high school junior and senior students had limited instructional opportunities outside of the self-contained classroom, so Michelle focused on providing her students with high-quality and engaging instruction. After her students graduated high school, most went onto a transition program where the instructional focus was on independent living skills, accessing the community, and securing employment. She saw her class as the last stop in her students' academic careers, and she felt that it was important that she help them grow academically as much as possible, but Michelle also wanted to ensure that her students were prepared for life after high school in the transition program or potentially the workforce. When I asked her a question about inclusion during our first interview, she directed the conversation back to her academic instruction. She explained that she has *so many different academic needs inside my classroom, so many different levels*. She said that she teaches *everything to my high students and then I just break it down to my lower students, so they're getting the same exact education as my higher kids*. If a student has gaps in their academic knowledge, she uses small group instructional time to target those skills, but she would never skip over an academic topic because a student was functioning at a lower cognitive or academic level. She stated that *if I'm teaching one child about 'matter,' I'm not going to teach the next kid about 'crayons,' you know, even though that's their 'academic level.'* *No, I'm going to teach them to that highest level possible*. Unlike special education curriculum of the past that focused exclusively on developmental skills (Downing, 2010), Michelle provided access to academics to all of her students equitably. Michelle explained that some of her students read chapter books while others struggle to count past 15. Even though her students had a variety of academic strengths and weaknesses, she wanted to

expose them to as many topics and standards as possible because she knew that her class might be the last chance for them to receive that academic knowledge. She believed that it was important to understand *my kids, see what they're going through, where they lack, what they need to be exposed to, and different things they are going through or about to go through* so that she could *insert that* into her lessons. She believed that high-quality instruction was intentionally planned, not just an assortment of *random topics*. If a student had a particular interest or gift, she encouraged them to use their *gifts as much as possible* and planned lessons where those abilities could shine.

Michelle saw a link between students in her class who struggled academically and who also had behavioral outbursts. She told me about one student who came to her class at 20-years old. She said that *he did not know ABC's; he did not know numbers, but he knew the streets!* Michelle stayed consistent with her expectations for him and helped him work through his behaviors and within a year, he was *able to read on a first-grade level*. She said that being able to see that growth was why she stayed in education. She understood that her students *want to learn*, and she wanted to be there to help them grow. While other teachers in that student's past would just *do fun activities to avoid behaviors*, she did not *ignore the behavior*; but instead, she worked to find a solution so that everyone could get back to the lesson. She said that *compassion goes a long way* and that *you have to find out the reason why these behaviors are taking place. What happened the night before? Sometimes medication is not given correctly. Showing a child that you love them and care about their well-being will curb a lot of those behaviors. A child has to trust you first. Once they trust you, they will give you a lot of what you're asking for.*

In addition to academic instruction, Michelle dedicated some of her instructional time each day to teaching transition skills so that when her students went onto the transition program,

they would be more prepared to access their community and more successful in the transition program. Her goal was to create a learning environment where students were *actively engaged* and where she *taught the things that the students need to know that's going to help them later on in life*. After the students ate breakfast in the cafeteria each morning, they had a *morning life skill bag* that they used to freshen up for the day and *take care of their hygiene*. She described how she used the provided instructional curriculum, Unique Learning System (ULS), to incorporate more transition-related instruction into her classroom each day. She gave an example of what one of these lessons would look like where she pulled up a restaurant menu from ULS, and her students acted out ordering off of the menu. She gave them certain requirements where they had to *order one thing from this component and one thing from this component, and then what type of condiments*. The students had to communicate their responses with the class, and at times she challenged them on their decisions to order certain items, like a soda during breakfast, and they talked through healthy and appropriate choices. Michelle understood that soon her students would be graduating high school and needed opportunities to develop their independence. Her class went on monthly CBI trips where they were able to practice these same life and transition skills in their community. She wanted to *put whatever it is going on in our space, in our world, right in front of them and have them learn about it in a fun, engaging way—whether it's role playing, acting out, or miming*. She wanted her students to be *engaged, alert, aware, informed, and happy to be there*. Michelle used the news website CNN-10 as part of her social studies class to help her students be informed of events happening around the world. She wanted her students to be able to listen to the news stories and *recall what they found out that day*. Michelle utilized the *transition component* of ULS because those were skills that her students especially needed as they inched closer to graduation and would be in the real-world. She remarked that most of her

fellow teachers did not use the transition materials as much as she did, but because she taught *seniors and juniors*, she knew *next year when they go to transition, they're going to have to know how do to all this*. Michelle used her academic and transition instruction to prepare her students for the next major stage in their lives. She had a sense of urgency for teaching and exposing the students to as much as possible because they may never have another opportunity like her class again.

My Instructional Connection

In my first year of teaching, I attended a professional development session on reading instruction for special education teachers. The session focused on using behaviorist teaching strategies for isolated reading skills. I was expected to use these strategies, packaged in a scripted curriculum program, as my daily reading instruction. I often felt like I was expected to focus on measurable academic skills, like recognizing sight words and rote counting, as opposed to more complex academic knowledge, such as reading comprehension and in-depth science and social studies topics. In my third year of teaching, I joined a cohort of regular education teachers at my school learning to implement guided reading, and I immediately recognized the difference between the skills-based reading instruction I was doing and the more holistic guided reading instruction, where the skills were taught within the context of fiction and non-fiction books.

I took this knowledge back into my classroom, and I will never forget the first guided reading session where I handed a book to one of my students and told her that instead of sight word flashcards, we would read this book together. The student looked at the book, looked at me, and was immediately lost. She did not know how to hold the book upright or turn the pages. After we worked through those tasks, I thought we were ready to dive into the text, but my student was quickly lost again. She could not track the words on the page, did not know to read from left to right and up to down, and was not attending to pictures to aid in comprehension. The

isolated sight word skills that I taught her were not transferable to the act of picking up a book and reading. What I thought was high-quality reading instruction was in fact failing her in real-world contexts. By only focusing on the isolated reading skills, I was not providing her or any of my other students with the opportunity to apply those skills to anything other than flashcard drills.

When Miss Honey, Lindsey, and Michelle provided academic instruction that related to students' real-life experiences and interests, they helped them engage with their world. Their instruction had meaning and purpose for their students' lives because it showed the students how their interests could be accessed within the community. Miss Honey knew that her students would like the noise and excitement of a school assembly, but she also knew that at times, her students would get frustrated and engage in self-injurious behavior. Her social story helped her students understand what to expect, and the visual schedule helped the volunteer at the concession stand know how to best communicate with her students. Lindsey used the weekly coffee cart as an opportunity for her students and general education students to collaborate and interact with others in the school community while practicing communication and money skills. Michelle understood that her class would be potentially the last place where her students would be engaged in academic instruction, but that they also needed to be prepared to transition into their post-high school lives, so she planned instruction that addressed both academics and transition in ways that were engaging to her students, such as role playing and discussion.

The teachers not only provided instruction to their students, but they saw their students as active participants in the learning process. Lindsey repeatedly described her students as *really, really smart* while Miss Honey talked about her students as being *praise-seeking* and working *really hard at things*. Michelle explained that during her reading stations, she provided extra

chapter books because her *students just can't get enough learning and some of them, you know, really fight me to learn* more. The teachers used their instruction to equip their students with knowledge to better access the world around them. They showed their students more places where they can and do belong and taught the skills students needed to make those spaces feel familiar and accessible—whether it was the airport, the zoo, a restaurant, or a school assembly.

Building Nos/otras Through Instruction

Anzaldúa acknowledged that within our multicultural society, there were boundaries that separated ‘us’ and ‘others.’ She wrote about how thinking about identity in a binary perspective, including “genders, races, classes, regions, generations, and physical and mental capacities” only served to perpetuate exclusion of some within society (2015a, p. 92). She believed that through the conceptualization of the nos/otras, we could live in a society where human difference and variation did not relegate someone to a second-class existence. Nos/otras was a space where all belong without the expectation of assimilation. When Miss Honey, Lindsey, and Michelle provided high-quality instruction that was connected to real-world learning experiences, they helped their students learn how to be active participants in interactions within their community. Miss Honey explained that at times people outside of special education do not inherently recognize students with severe disabilities as having much to contribute. As I listened to the teachers explain their approach to instruction and as I looked at the documents that they shared with me, I did not see evidence of skills-based direct instruction; instead, I saw academic content and the application of that content with the students’ real-life experiences. Their instruction was an important facet of the bridge between nos and otras because it helped connect the students to their community and the world. For instance, each of the teachers incorporated money skills and purchasing preferred items into their mathematics instruction. Because the students learned how to purchase a preferred item in the classroom, they had the necessary skill set to actively

participate when shopping with a family member or friend. The students were more prepared to make choices about something that directly impacted their lives, such as what clothes to wear or what food to eat, because they were already familiar with these kinds of choice-making activities in the classroom. The students were able to participate in real-world learning experiences in the classroom and then generalize those experiences outside in the community.

Theme Two: Instruction to Challenge Perceptions of Others

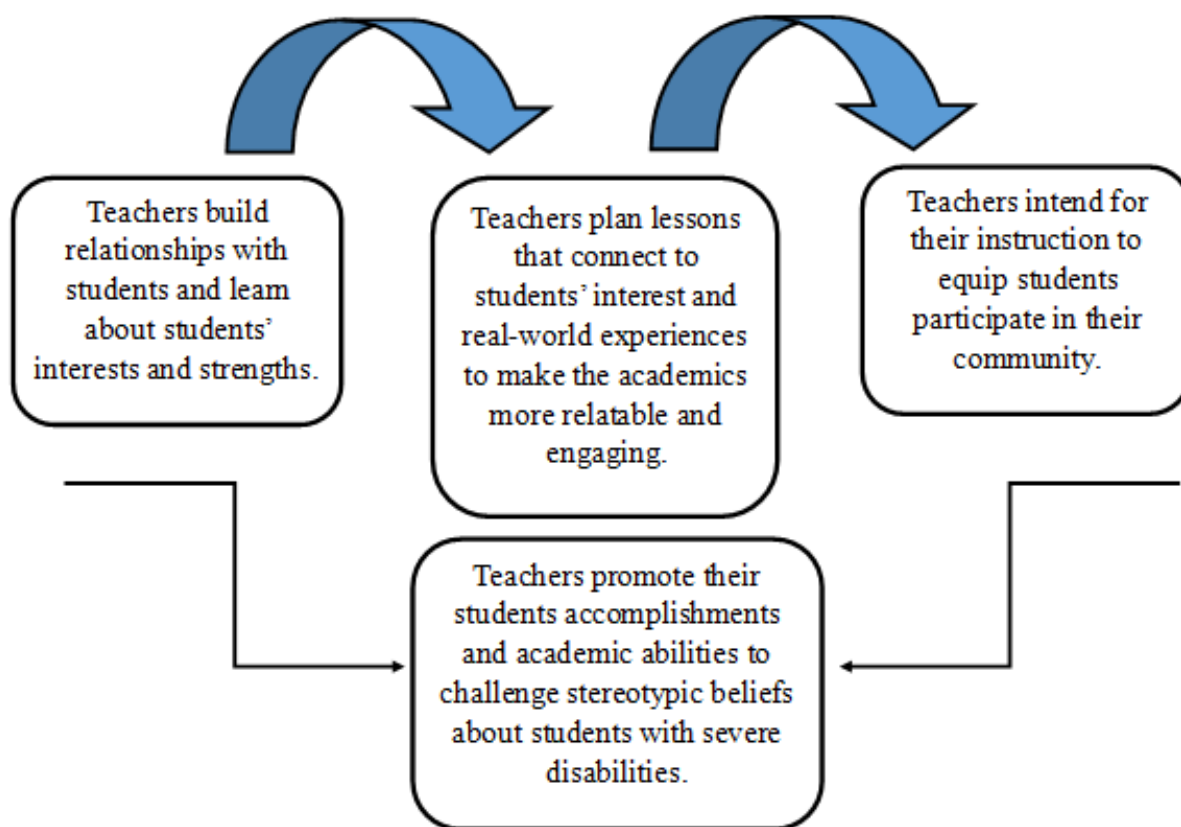
Imagine for a moment that you are a special education teacher for students with severe disabilities. You provide high-quality instruction that is engaging to your students, and they are showing progress towards mastery of many of their goals. You are proud of your students and know how smart they are. Their disability is not the defining hallmark of their identity. You know that they will continue to grow and learn, and you are excited to be a part of that experience. You head to your weekly staff meeting and are making small talk with the general education teacher at your table. You share that your student—who she knows is nonverbal, uses a communication device, and is in your MOID classroom—has mastered all of his multiplication facts and is moving onto division. The general education teacher looks at you and smirks in disbelief as if saying ‘your student can’t do that.’ Frustrated and defeated, you wish that more people would take the time to understand your students and recognize how capable they are. Why do people still believe that self-contained classes are not also spaces of academic success?

Michelle, Lindsey, and Miss Honey provided high-quality instruction for their students, but they recognized that other school personnel and parents had a limited understanding of the depth and breadth of academic instruction that their students engaged with each day. They used their positions to challenge stereotypes of what happens in self-contained classrooms by fostering a reputation for being an academic-centered classroom, inviting others into their classrooms to observe, and planning lessons that included evidence of learning that they could

display (see Figure 4). I define these actions as advocacy because the teachers chose to not let their students' abilities stay contained inside of the classroom; but instead, each teacher found their own way of promoting their students' abilities to the community. They pushed back on stereotypes of what self-contained teachers teach and what students with severe disabilities learn.

Figure 4

Model of Theme Two



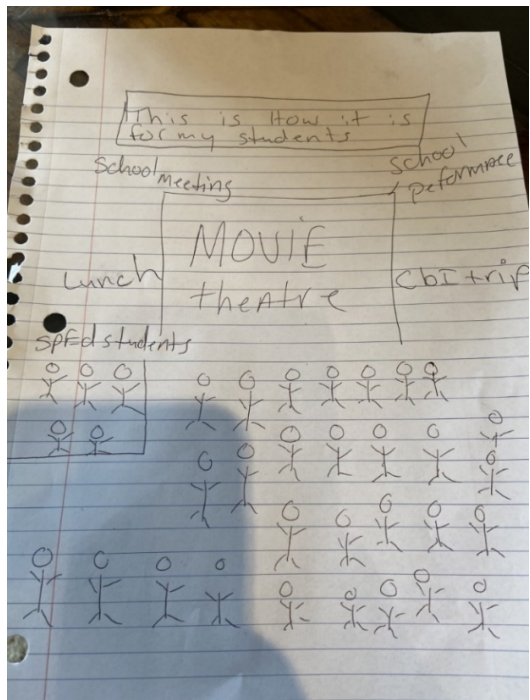
Michelle's Advocacy

A few years before Michelle started working at Lincoln High School, the principal at the time had a violent physical altercation with a student in one of the self-contained classes. After that incident, the principal rarely came to visit and made little effort to be involved in what was going on in any of the self-contained classrooms. In Michelle's first year as the MOID teacher, she explained learning about what felt like an unwritten culture that the special education

teachers were expected to *just keep [the students] contained, and [administrators] don't care what you do*. Teachers felt like *just don't burn down the school and just don't put us on the news* were the sentiments. Michelle said that even if that was not *necessarily what they were thinking, that's how we felt*. Without the support of administration, it was hard to ensure her students had access to opportunities outside of her classroom or to get others to understand what her students were capable of achieving academically. During our photo-elicited interview, Michelle shared a hand-drawn picture of how her students are included during school meetings, lunch, school performances, and trips (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Michelle's Representation of How Inclusion is Experienced by Her Students



In each of these settings, her students have a dedicated space, separate from the rest of the student body. When her students were included in school events, they were corralled into an isolated corner that she referred to *VIP section* where her students *have to walk through a whole entire audience just to go to the front to sit on the left*. Her students felt *pointed out and clam up*

when they have to sit in this separate space. She wished instead that her students had more natural access to general education spaces where others *made room* for them as opposed to containing them in one VIP section.

After being at Lincoln High School for a few years, Michelle developed a reputation for herself as a strong teacher, and when describing her relationship with her paraprofessional, she said that *if you're not a hard worker, you won't last in my class. Para[professionals] cry not to come because we work from the second we come to the second we leave, and everybody don't love they job the way I love my job.* During our second interview, Michelle walked me through a typical day in her classroom and focused in detail all of the instructional activities that she does with her students. The school day was divided into four blocks with three instructional blocks and one elective block. Michelle's lessons built on one another, so if the class was participating in a history lesson, she asked her students comprehension questions as if it was an English Language Arts (ELA) lesson. While students worked on a math task, she incorporated transition skills to reinforce how those math skills translated into the community. She utilized *stations* for ELA and math so that she could tailor small group instruction specifically to each student and intensively address any academic deficits. She spoke at times of the perceptions that others had of self-contained classes that *they just play all day*, and she frequently reiterated how that was not what happened in her class, even down to when her students took short dance breaks between tasks, which she also referred to as *brain breaks*. Michelle knew that after *15 or 20 minutes of sitting down, learning* that her students needed a chance to get up and move around to recharge, so she incorporated YouTube dance videos. Even though she believed these short brain breaks were important, she did not want a visitor to her class to assume that all her students did was dance to YouTube videos, so she made sure that her paraprofessional and she also participated in

the activity. Michelle was *very, very adamant about whatever my students is doing, we're doing, and so we'll get up, and we'll do the dance no matter how silly we look, no matter how off-beat we are, we just do it with the kids*. She believed that if someone came into her classroom, and Michelle and her paraprofessional were sitting while the students were dancing, it would feed into the stereotype that *people are just having fun and chilling*. She also remarked that she did not have teacher desks in her classroom because *if you have desks, people use desks to sit in them, and when you're in a class with special needs students, you need to be right with them*. She wanted to ensure that when visitors came into her classroom, they saw her and her paraprofessional working and students learning, and she never wanted anyone to come in and see one of them sitting behind a desk.

At the beginning of the school year, a new principal was assigned to Michelle's school, and Michelle saw this change in leadership as an opportunity to advocate for greater awareness of her students. She told me that *from the first conversation that I had with her, I told her how I felt about the treatment of my students*. Michelle understood that the VIP section at school events was part of a *system that's been put into place, and it takes time* for that system to change, so Michelle was hopeful that the new administration in her school could help facilitate changes in that system. She made it a point to *invite my admin[istrators] as much as possible to my classroom—like, I invite them so much that they'll be like "Michelle, I can't come see you today."* By inviting administrators and others into her classroom, she could show what her students were learning and challenge any preconceived notions of what her students were capable of achieving in a self-contained class.

Lindsey's Advocacy

Lindsey teaches at a STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and math) elementary school where each teacher is required to teach a certain number of STEM and

STEAM-related lessons each month. Her students also attended a weekly STEAM lab specials classes with general education peers. Lindsey found that collaborating with her STEAM specialist was a beneficial way to promote high-quality learning opportunities for her students. During our second interview, Lindsey showed me some of the lesson plans and instructional materials that she used for science and other subjects. One lesson was on electric circuits. She used a PowerPoint presentation made by the district special education curriculum team to introduce vocabulary terms. She noted that the PowerPoint *was nice because it already had a lot of visuals already in it* as well as diagrams and links to online videos. She used the PowerPoint presentation every day she taught the unit to help reinforce the concepts, and then she collaborated with her *STEAM specialist to come and she actually built a circuit with them, and they absolutely loved it*. Her students were able to take what they learned from Lindsey and have the opportunity to engage with it hands-on with the STEAM specialist.

Lindsey's collaboration with the STEAM specialists continued when the STEAM lab specials class adopted the project of creating a butterfly garden in front of the school. Lindsey's students were able to help, along with the general education students, *cut old water lines, load all of the dirt back in, and put the plants in* to the garden. The STEAM lab specials class had multiple garden beds on campus where the students *grow all different types of plants and use them for* lessons in the classroom. Lindsey said that some of her favorite lessons to teach were ones related to plants and life cycles of plants because it was a topic that the students could easily relate to in their real-life. Lindsey wanted to give her students an additional opportunity to grow their own plants, and so she asked the STEAM specialist to use one of the extra, unused garden beds on the school campus that was *right outside our classroom* (see Figure 6). The students were able to plant seeds in the garden bed as well as *inside our room* so that they could compare

and *see the difference* between the growing conditions. Her collaboration with the STEAM specialist helped her students have a deeper, more tangible understanding of academic curriculum.

Figure 6

Garden Bed Used by Lindsey's Class



When the STEAM specialist was doing a research study for a graduate school course, Lindsey volunteered to have her class participate in the study. When *he came in* to her classroom *and observed* mathematics lessons, Lindsey noted that the STEAM specialist was shocked that her class was *so smart* and surprised to learn that her class was *able to learn these same standards that these kids are doing in gen[eral] ed[ucation]*. By participating in the research study, she was able to promote that her students *can learn the same things that everybody else is, just at a different level*. Lindsey also had visitors observe her classroom from the district office and other schools to see STEAM lessons that she taught. She was able to *model* instruction *for*

what they can use in their school, and the visitors can see how it's done in a special ed[ucation] classroom. In all of our conversations, Lindsey talked about how people don't understand that our kids can learn, and how they don't know what our classroom is like and what the kids are doing, and also how people will try to dumb down what we're doing, and they don't think [my students] can do anything. She set high expectations for herself as a teacher to find strategies and ways to differentiate her instruction so that even more challenging standards are presented in a way that her students are going to be able to understand. She wanted to give them instruction that is on the cusp of what they can do so that she could push them farther than they probably think they can go. When visitors saw her students were working on academic topics like decimals, fractions, and units of measurement, she was not surprised to hear the visitors remarked to her that oh my gosh, I didn't know you guys did this in here. She reiterated to them that it is important to take the time to come in here because we do teach.

Miss Honey's Advocacy

Miss Honey's middle school students required a significant amount of support from her and her paraprofessionals to participate in academic learning. She acknowledged how it was hard to get others to understand that, even though that learning looked different, it did not mean that there was no academic instruction taking place. When I asked Miss Honey about some of her favorite lessons to teach, she acknowledged that she personally loves *literature, but it's so hard to send evidence of that home that's not clearly 'Miss Honey did this for your child. Miss Honey put your child's hand on the answer'* because the student needed that physical prompting to participate. She said that she enjoyed doing science experiments with her students *that are really concrete, either a yes or no, we can put it on a chart, and we can take pictures of it, and we can send it home.* She described doing experiments with magnets where her students could find objects around the school building and test for magnetism as well as experiments using objects in

water to test if they float or sink. She took pictures of her students doing the experiments and then displayed those pictures on *a big bulletin board* so that people walking by her classroom could see what her students were learning, and then she would send the pictures home to the parents to show that *yes your child is doing academics*.

Miss Honey planned lessons that took her students outside of their classroom setting so the students could do an academic activity while also practicing social greetings with people less familiar to them. She explained how her students do go into general education classes, but when they enter those classes, they are expected to *join in on what they're doing* in the general education class. When her students *need to do something different*, such as collecting survey data to make a chart or a graph, the general education classroom was not the best place to do that because they would be *disrupting* the learning going on in that classroom; so instead, they would survey *the office staff and the counselors*. Miss Honey utilized visiting the office because they were always *amazing at stopping what they're doing, answering my kids' questions, accepting a candy bar*. They helped reinforce *proper interactions* while also helping her students complete their academic activity.

When Miss Honey's students attended general education classes, she wanted them to be prepared and able to contribute, so she collaborated with the general education teacher to know what the lesson would be so that she could pre-teach the vocabulary with her students. She wanted her students to have a connection to what was going on in the general education class and ensure that this different setting was able to feel familiar because *they're learning the same thing we are*. She saw these inclusive opportunities as chances for her students to *interact with the world outside of special ed[ucation]* as well as a chance for her to educate *people who are*

outside the special ed[ucation] community, outside of our classrooms, who might not understand how much our kids can do and how much our kids have to give and have to offer.

My Advocacy Connection

Throughout my teaching career, I planned countless lessons for my students, some good, some great, some a total bust. My favorite unit was based on a social studies standard about the government providing public services funded through tax revenue. I focused on many of those public services and the people who work in those jobs, and I incorporated the topic of community helpers to make it more relevant to my students. My students played games where they learned the vocabulary words, watched short clips of people in those jobs, and used sentence frames to write informational papers about a community helper of their choice. I wanted the students to be able to practice their presentation skills and reading aloud their informational papers, whether that reading was with their voice or with the assistance of their augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices. I planned a wax museum activity for my class to present their writing, and I sent a letter home to my students' families inviting them into the building to see their children present their writing. Not wanting to overwhelm my students, I invited only a handful of classes on my hallway to also come in and see our wax museum, and I also invited my administrators. I recall in my email to my administrators where I emphasized how my students were so excited to share in what they learned, and I hoped that they would support our event.

On the day of the wax museum, I got to school early and transformed my classroom into a museum. Each student dressed up as their community helper, had a table of books and props related to that community helper's job, and their writing page to present to the visitors. Almost all of the families came, and one remarked to me that this was the first time they were ever invited to the school to see their child in a presentation. General education students came in

small groups to listen to my students read, with voice or AAC, their writing compositions and ask follow-up questions. It was beautiful. My students were so excited to show their families, administrators, and friends from other classes what they knew about the community helpers, and I took such pride in being able to show others how capable my students were as presenters in the wax museum.

I feel a connection to Michelle, Lindsey, and Miss Honey's experiences challenging others' perceptions about our students with severe disabilities. I could tell many stories of being excluded or blocked from places because someone thought it was not for my class or times where I showed up with my class, uninvited, because I wanted my class to participate anyways. What strikes me the most about Michelle, Lindsey, and Miss Honey's stories is that their activism was directly related to their instruction. The teachers knew the lessons that they planned and the standards that they covered in their classes, but they also understood that the perception was that self-contained classes were not spaces of academic rigor like general education classes. When Michelle's students needed a brain break, she participated with them so that if someone came in, they would understand it was just an instructional break, not what they do all day. Lindsey taught her students about plants and then collaborated with the STEAM specialist to bring that instruction to life by working alongside general education peers to build a butterfly garden. Michelle and Lindsey frequently received visitors to observe their classes learning academic curriculum. Miss Honey did experiments with her students and photographed it so that she could display to the school personnel and to parents at home that her students were learning academics. Their activism started with their high-quality instruction, and then they messaged it out to others as a way to promote what their students were learning and what they were teaching. In this way, the teachers were advocating for their own professional legitimacy as teachers who

provide academic instruction. They understood that many people they came into contact with did not think that students with severe disabilities were capable of participating in academics on the level that general education students did. They understood stereotypes of self-contained classes as non-academic settings, and they wanted to break that stereotype with their instruction and also how they publicized that instruction.

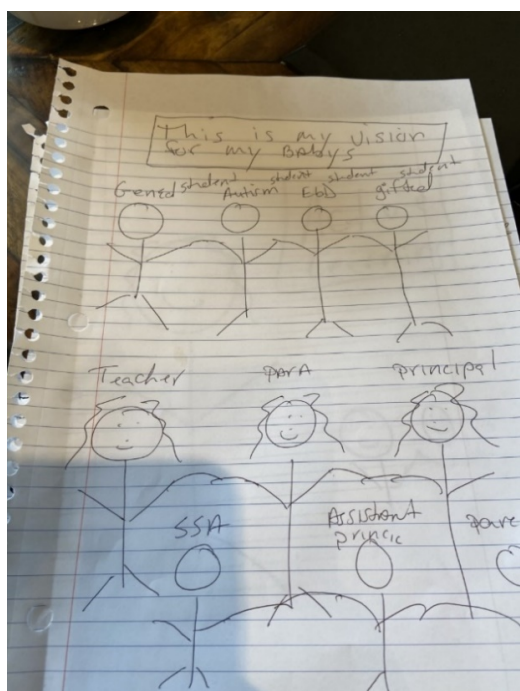
Nepantlera Advocacy

Anzaldúa believed that activism was a central part of challenging stereotypes and promoting awareness of those perceived to be others. She wrote that as a society, we “revise reality by altering our consensual agreements about what is real, what is just and fair. We can trans-shape reality by changing our perspectives and perceptions. By choosing a different future, we bring it into being” (2015b, p. 21). Nepantlera are the people who help others challenge their perspectives. The actions of the nepantlera help foster a new sense of reality. Each of the teachers acted as nepantlera when they promoted their students’ abilities and accomplishments and fostered a reputation for being a classroom where learning occurs. For hundreds of years, people with disabilities have been the negative end of the able/disable binary. While some students with severe disabilities may never achieve the same level of academic mastery as their general education peers, Michelle, Lindsey, and Miss Honey recognized that their students possessed strengths and interests that their instruction could build upon. Disabled was not the only facet of their students’ identities. Instead of keeping what they were teaching a secret, the special education teachers found ways to transmit that knowledge out into the school and home community. They wanted others to recognize that not only do the special education teacher teach, but their students with severe disabilities learn, too. Anzaldúa wrote that nepantlera could help lead the charge to the development of a more inclusive society. The nepantlera alone could not change a system, but their activism could spur even more people into action. She stated that

“engaging in the nos/otras imperative (of removing the slash) will take effort by members of all communities cooperating with others. The new tribalism is about working together to create new ‘stories’ of identity and culture, to envision diverse futures” (2015a, p. 85). Michelle’s drawing of her hope for her students provides a model for what nosotras (without the slash) could look like in schools (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

Michelle’s Vision of Nosotras



In the image, she illustrated the general education student, student with autism, student with emotional-behavior disorder (EBD), and the gifted student *all learning together*. She recognized that it was not within her power to make this vision possible alone, so at the bottom of the page, she drew the adults who all contribute *to make sure that absolutely happens*. The special education teachers acting as nepantlera, promoting their students’ abilities, and challenging perceptions that others hold are all pivotal actions in the creation of nosotras.

Theme Three: Barriers to Sustaining Inclusive Opportunities

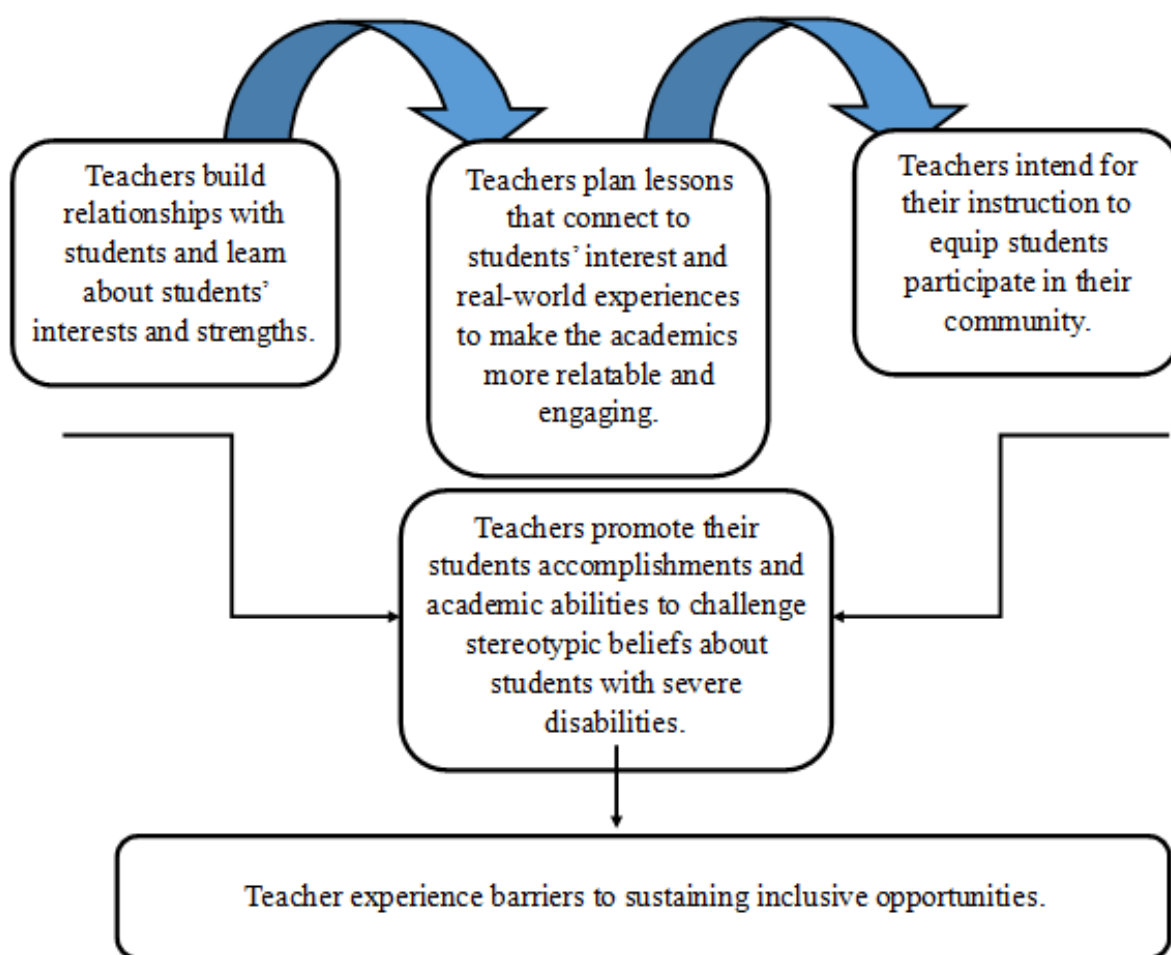
Imagine for a moment that you are a special education teacher for students with severe disabilities. You have taught at your school for a few years now, and you have developed professional relationships with your colleagues. It is March, and Read Across America Day is Friday. The planning committee for the school-wide event organizes a sign-up sheet for classes to pair up as book buddies. Some of the students in your class have some unpredictable behaviors, like aggression and elopement, and these behaviors are more likely to occur when there is a change in the predictable schedule. You worry that no one will want to pair up with you class, and it will be another event that your students are excluded from; but then, you are relieved that a fourth-grade teacher reaches out wanting to pair up with your class. The event goes off without a hitch, and you catch yourself getting a little emotional at how incredible it was to watch your students and their peers read together. It was more than a reading activity to you. It was an opportunity for your students to develop friendships. You email the fourth-grade teacher at the end of the day to say thank you for seeking us out and making sure we were included, and if she ever wanted to make it a weekly activity, you would love to collaborate. She responds at how great it would be to have weekly book buddies, but end of year assessments are coming up, and any flexibility she would normally have in her schedule is going to be devoted entirely to preparing for the test. You know that the more times your students do something, the more comfortable and confident they are. The consistency helps them accept the event as part of their schedule, are less likely to engage in negative behaviors, and more likely to enjoy themselves. If it is something that is inconsistent, you know it will be harder for your students to be successful. Is it ever going to be easier to guarantee opportunities for inclusion?

Lindsey, Michelle, and Miss Honey advocated for a variety of inclusive opportunities for their students, and their students participated in events and activities across the campus;

however, each teacher experienced barriers to keeping some of those inclusive opportunities sustainable (see Figure 8). In some instances, those barriers were imposed by other teachers who restricted access, or the barriers were formed by a school culture that naturally made it harder to tap into opportunities. Other times, the behavioral outbursts and medical needs of the students created barriers to maintaining consistent access.

Figure 8

Model of Theme Three



Lindsey's Inclusion

Lindsey had a mix of successful and unsustainable inclusive initiatives at her elementary school. Her most successful inclusive opportunity was the coffee shop that her students ran each

week with their general education peers. She was also able to seamlessly incorporate her students in some of the school-wide programs that recognize student success, such as a *student of the month in math and reading*. She nominated her students when they displayed the *character word of the month*, and then her students were recognized on the morning announcements. Lindsey's students attended pep rallies with guest speakers and other school celebrations.

Lindsey acknowledged that many general education teachers were *pretty open to working with us* on different lessons that she planned. Lindsey taught a unit on following the scientific method to do experiments where she arranged students from a general education class to come to her class and do *the experiments with us*. Her students presented their findings in a *science fair* at the end of the unit, and the general education students presented with her students. Lindsey taught a unit on writing letters, and so she was able to organize having her students write *letters back and forth to a general ed[ucation] classroom in our school*. Because Lindsey has taught at her school for a while, she knew which teachers were open to collaborating with her and her students. She said that there were a few teachers at her school who were not interested in collaborating because it was *too much work*, or the general education teacher thought that her students did not belong *in here*, referring to their general education classrooms. Lindsey said that the previous school year, she *implemented a book buddy* activity where general education students *would come in once a week and pick one of our students to read with* or practice reading *sight words* together. She said that the weekly book buddy activity eventually *dwindled out 'cause some of the teachers just aren't super open to having their kids come and do that because if they don't visually see it and see how well it helps both parties, they aren't as open to doing it*.

I believe that Lindsey's recognition of teachers either being open or closed to collaborating with her class tapped into an important point of inclusion. It was easy for Lindsey

to nominate her students for a student of the month recognition and to know when the assembly was to make sure her students attend. When she had a choice and the autonomy to make the inclusion happen for her students, it was more likely to be sustainable. When Lindsey had to rely on other teachers to be open and willing to provide that access, it was not as simple. There was a power dynamic at play because Lindsey had to rely on general education teachers to be open to having their students collaborate. If the general education teacher did not believe her students would benefit or thought that Lindsey's students should stay in their self-contained class, that general education teacher created a barrier that blocked access for Lindsey's students. When Lindsey recognized that the general education students her class attended specials with could help with the coffee shop, that general education teacher had to be willing to let her students leave her classroom to participate. If the general education teacher was not open to it, the coffee shop would have remained a self-contained student-run program. Without the support of general education teachers, Lindsey's students would not have as many opportunities to collaborate with their peers.

Michelle's Inclusion

Michelle's high school had a longstanding culture of isolating the self-contained classes within their classrooms on the *sped hallway* or designated areas at school events. The *keep 'em contained, and we don't care what you do with them* sentiment made it harder for Michelle to ensure access for her students in places outside of her classroom. Because Michelle taught high school, her students had some opportunities within the school that Lindsey and Miss Honey did not in the elementary and middle school levels. Unlike the other special education teachers, students from general education had more opportunities to interact with Michelle's students in non-academic settings, such as the cafeteria and in the hallways during class change. She described the general education students at Lincoln High School as accepting of her students,

and they *embrace our population*. Her students established a *commitment with the football team to work as managers within the football team*. Her students were *recognized as being managers on the first game* and were able to *run out* onto the field with the team. She said that the football players especially *love our students, so they always give them [high]-fives and stuff in the hallway*. General education students could also sign up for an elective course to be an *intern* in her classroom, learning the *position of a paraprofessional* in a special education classroom. She recognized that some students believed that signing up to be a student intern would mean they *get a free credit*, but connecting back to Michelle's reputation as a strong academic teacher, she made sure the interns knew that *in my class, they have to work*. The interns would *teach and assist* with lessons, and they would take her students around to *different places within the building just to incorporate them more*. She recognized that *without them, they don't have a chance to get in contact with the other people in the building as much*.

Most of the barriers to access that Michelle and her students faced were, like Lindsey, with other adults in the building. With Michelle's new principal in place, she said that the culture was getting better, and her principal *made it her business to include us some more*, but there were still obstacles to overcome. Her students' fourth block was the time for them to attend elective classes, but Michelle struggled throughout the year to get her students into elective classes and keep them there. She acknowledged that *it sounds bad, but it is so true*. Her school was overcrowded, so electives teachers told her that there was *not enough room for her students*; they couldn't *cater to our kids, even if we send our para[professionals] with them*; and that the work was too *serious* for her students. She described trying to advocate for her students attending these elective classes as *fighting for them to get it*. Eventually some of the students who were higher functioning, but still in self-contained classes, were able to enroll in one electives course,

but the students' *behaviors* were *really, really difficult for the teacher, so they pulled them out.*

Without a dedicated space to go during the electives block, Michelle's students visited one of the other self-contained classes. Without guaranteed inclusive opportunities like electives, she said her classroom could feel *secluded* and *it feels like it's just us versus the whole entire school.*

Michelle had to rely on the electives teachers to grant access to her students, and when they were unwilling, she had little power to change the situation.

Miss Honey's Inclusion

Miss Honey had ample inclusive opportunities for her students throughout her middle school building. Her students ate breakfast in the cafeteria each morning where students and cafeteria staff would stop and greet the class. They attended assemblies, and the office staff welcomed their visits when they needed to collect some quick survey data for a mathematics activity. At the beginning of the school year, Miss Honey would meet with the connections teacher for art as well as general education teachers who were open to her students visiting, and they would review her students behavior intervention plans (BIP) and collaborate on what kinds of supports her students needed in those general education classes.

Miss Honey said that her *goal as a SID/PID teacher is to have my students be part of a community* and to help ensure her students have *access [their community] in a way that they can.* She valued her students being able to engage, in positive ways, with others in the school community, but she also recognized that her students needed support in these engagements. Miss Honey mediated many interactions with her students such as when they ate breakfast in the cafeteria in the morning, and general education students would pass by saying hello. Her students would not immediately recognize that someone was greeting them, and it took them *a minute before they kind of come to the surface before they interact with you.* Miss Honey recognized that a passing hello was too quick of an interaction for her students to be able to recognize and

respond to, so she mediated by prompting her students that *so and so said hi to you, our friends are saying hi to you, isn't that cool* so that she could *keep them at the surface a little bit* longer to notice and engage with the peers who were greeting them. She said that she was not sure if her encouragement was enough to get her students to fully recognize that someone was engaging with them, but that she did it anyways. In these instances, Miss Honey helped her students better engage with their peers, and she was also helping general education peers better engage with her students. Over time, the hope would be that Miss Honey would not need to intervene to slow down the social interaction because the peers would learn from Miss Honey how to interact with her students to elicit that *come to the surface* social interaction themselves.

Even though Miss Honey could *brag on my peeps* concerning all of the inclusive opportunities available to her students, she also told me about times where her students' behaviors impacted their ability to go out into other classes or stay in inclusive spaces for a prolonged period of time. Many of her students engaged in aggressive or self-injurious behaviors when they felt anxious, frustrated, or if their surroundings felt unpredictable. When Miss Honey would alert her class that it was time to go to art, one student, Laura (pseudonym), would sometimes hide under her blanket. Miss Honey would prompt Laura a few times to *come on, stand up*, but if she did not stand, Miss Honey *respected [her] no*. Other times, Laura would get up and start down the hall to the art class but would get frustrated en route and start hitting herself in the head. Laura and other students also had medical conditions that made them more prone to *exhaustion issues*. When they were ill, Miss Honey said that they could scream, *constant pain screaming*, for hours. She acknowledged that at times of illness, it was *not appropriate to ask* the students to *venture out* or to expect *anyone else around them to ignore it*.

Miss Honey explained that her class this year was different than others in the past with the intensity of behaviors and medical concerns, so it caused them to miss out on more than in the past. Miss Honey described the media center as a place that her previous classes visited often to attend lessons taught by the media specialist alongside their general education peers. Because of the *medical fragility this year and Olivia's (pseudonym) aggressions*, they did not attend the media center lessons this school year. Miss Honey recognized those lessons were *valuable* inclusive learning opportunities, but that it was not something that *would work for me right now*, but she wished it could. She would *really like* her students, *especially the student with the aggression, to be able to learn to interact in a way to be able to enjoy some of that too*. Eating lunch in the cafeteria was also a time where inclusion in general education settings had to be limited because of students' medical fragility and aggressive behaviors. The cafeteria manager would send the *staff member to me every day to deliver lunches*, and she would help Miss Honey *reinforce* the routine of how to get ready for lunch so that the students were still experiencing a familiar lunch experience comparable to their peers in spite of eating in the self-contained class for health and safety reasons.

In part because of Miss Honey's background working at schools for students with behavior disorders, she saw her students' behaviors as something that could be addressed through explicit instruction where she taught her students a better, safer way to autonomously demonstrate their wishes and needs. She knew that *if we ever could get the right balance of interventions and responsibility on the student's part...there's a kid in there who does want to make people happy, she just doesn't know that not hitting people is part of it*. She described how she was teaching Laura to take Miss Honey's hand and *lead you to leave* when she was ready to leave an assembly or connections class but that *Laura doesn't always do that before she does the*

self-injurious behavior, so we're working on that. Miss Honey frequently described her students' behaviors as works in progress and made the point that when her students did not want something or requested to leave an inclusive setting, that the *request is always honored*. She recognized that her students this year had less opportunities for inclusion than her previous students, but as much as she could provide for her students, she could. She felt the tension between wanting to ensure her students were a part of a community and knowing that the *rest of the school's goal is to achieve high test scores*. At times when her students were in good spirits and healthy, those inclusive opportunities were absolutely appropriate, but other times *there's some safety issues*. She constantly was balancing respecting her students' autonomy, trying to expose them to as many experiences as possible, and ensuring the safety of her students as well as other students and staff in the building.

My Inclusion Connection

Two main kinds of barriers existed for the three participants. Michelle and Lindsey experienced similar kinds of barriers with other teachers in their buildings resisting inclusive interactions from taking place while Miss Honey at times had to impose restrictions on access to inclusive spaces in response to the behavioral and health needs of her students. In this section, I address my connection and reflection to both kinds of barriers.

High-Stakes Testing and the Non-Existent Inclusion

Michelle and Lindsey acknowledged that there were colleagues that they worked with who were more willing to embrace their students in inclusive settings than others. For Michelle, her principal pushed for more access into general education settings, but the electives teachers were adamant that there was not enough space and the curriculum was too challenging for her students. Lindsey experienced barriers when attempting to sustain the reading buddies' program and acknowledged that because the general education teacher did not see the benefit, it made it

much harder to keep the program functioning on a weekly basis. When I reflected on moments in my career similar to the barriers Lindsey and Michelle experienced, I thought back to a general education student, Terrance (pseudonym), who I coached in an after school running club.

Terrance was friendly with some of my students who stayed in the after-school program (ASP) when their groups were in the gym together. He enjoyed playing basketball with my students and developed a friendship with them. He loved saying hello to us when he passed us in the hall, and at breakfast in the morning, he would insist that my students stand with him and would help them get their milk and go through the line. When our running club practice was over, he knew some of my students were in ASP in the classroom next door, and he would ask to say hello and play a game with them until it was his time to go. His desire to be friends with my students was a beautiful thing. When I reached out to his classroom teacher about having a formal collaboration with Terrance and my class—maybe weekly book buddies meeting in the library or helping during our adapted physical education class—I was told no by his teacher because he was on the ‘projected to not pass the end of year tests’ list, so he needed to focus on preparing for the test. Miss Honey said it best when she said that her *goal as a SID/PID teacher is to have my students be part of a community* and that *the rest of the school’s goal is to achieve high test scores*. As long as the pressure of high-stakes testing dominates general education spaces, sustaining inclusion between students with severe disabilities and their general education peers will always be a challenge.

High-stakes testing was not the only reason that some teachers were averse to sustaining inclusion. Michelle often reiterated through our conversations that a school culture that fosters inclusion starts with the school leadership. She saw firsthand how a change in administration could open up more opportunities for her students, but that it would take time for the culture as a

whole to shift to be more inclusive. I have seen firsthand the difference between general education teachers who seek to include my class and those who do not give my students much thought. I have worked with teachers who tell me that my students cannot come to a special event because there is only enough time for the general education students to participate, or that there are not enough seats in the elective class so I would have to bring my own if I wanted my class to come at that time.

Sometimes I remind myself that when these teachers were students in school, they probably had limited interaction with students with severe disabilities, so I should be patient with them. Other times, I find myself just frustrated by their lack of empathy or willingness to include. I am grateful for the teachers who go out of their way to include my students in every special event, every field trip, every guest speaker because I know that my students enjoy having those experiences too. While Michelle may be right that administrators can help foster an inclusive school culture, she also understood, as she drew in Figure 7, that it takes the entire the school community—students, parents, and staff—to actively participate in ensuring that the spirit of inclusivity is sustained.

My Lunchtime Inclusion

I once sat in a professional development with other special education teachers and the topic of our classes eating lunch in the cafeteria came up. I always believed that eating lunch in the cafeteria was an important space for inclusion with general education peers, but also an opportunity for my students to learn how to negotiate the process of eating in the cafeteria independently. My students had to learn how to wait in line when it was nacho day and the line was backed up out of the cafeteria door. They had to learn that they are not allowed to have three sides of tater tots and that broccoli is actually tasty. In all my years of teaching, my students have

had a table in the cafeteria alongside their peers. Some years peers even joined our table, or I had a small group of students eat with a general education class. One teacher at the training remarked that it was ‘too much work’ to bring her class to the cafeteria, and so the cafeteria manager brought the food to her class each day. I was frustrated at the notion that providing the opportunity for her students was a bother to her and that her students were missing out on the inclusive experience of learning how to negotiate the cafeteria. Her students could not look at the choices in-person and decide to place an item on their tray. They missed out on learning the rules of the cafeteria, like stay in your seat and raise your hand if you forgot to grab a fork, and they did not get to wave to their friends in other classes or say ‘hello’ to the custodians when it was time to clean up. The students missed all of those experiences for no reason other than logistically it was easier for the teacher to keep her students in the classroom. In that instance, the special education teacher was imposing the barrier instead of facilitating the access for her students.

Miss Honey and her students challenged my perception that all students should always have the opportunity to eat lunch in the cafeteria. Her middle school cafeteria had hundreds of students filtering in and out for lunch. It was a loud and unpredictable space filled with food—exactly the kind of space that would trigger one of her students into aggressive behavior, so for the safety of her student and any other student or staff in the cafeteria, they opted to stay in the classroom at that time. Miss Honey arranged for her students to eat breakfast in the cafeteria instead because it was a less populated time where her students could have positive, meaningful interactions with peers and cafeteria staff. My journaling around this tension helped me make sense of why this felt so significant to me in contrast with my experience with the other teacher at the professional development. The other teacher chose not to afford her students the inclusive

opportunity because it was inconvenient for her. Miss Honey needed to have her students miss experiences for safety reasons, but she made every effort to offer other kinds of inclusive opportunities when health and behaviors were more under control. She also worked diligently, using social stories and behavioral interventions, to teach her students more appropriate behaviors so that one day, the cafeteria at lunchtime could be an accessible space to access.

Nepantlera as Advocates of Inclusion

Michelle, Lindsey, and Miss Honey were nepantlera. They recognized spaces within their school community where their students could belong but might not have a clear path to access in the same way that students in general education did, and they worked to facilitate that access. Their continual advocacy opened doors to general education spaces and helped general education teachers and students see the students with severe disabilities in a more positive light. At times, their work was met with opposition—teachers who did not think that their students belonged or student behaviors that made prolonged access challenging. Anzaldúa (2015a) recognized that each of us has “taken-for-granted truisms [...] imbibed at a young age and become life’s givens, a familiarity that makes us feel secure” (p. 86). If teachers or other staff members at these schools had limited experiences with people with disabilities, they may not share a vision of inclusion and acceptance for the students in Michelle, Lindsey, and Miss Honey’s classes. Anzaldúa (2002a) understood that experiencing opposition was an inevitable part of the nepantlera’s work, and she explained that:

You don’t build bridges to safe and familiar territories; you have to risk making mundo nuevo, have to risk the uncertainty of change. And nepantla is the only space where change happens. Change requires more than words on a page: It takes perseverance, creative ingenuity, and acts of love. (p. 574)

When met with barriers, Michelle, Lindsey, and Miss Honey did not give up and resign to keeping their students isolated in their classrooms. When Miss Honey's students were sick or in a particularly aggressive mood, she knew that going to the media center for an inclusive lesson might not be the safest choice, but she could take her students to the sensory room, read a social story about the assembly on Friday, and start preparing them for the next inclusive opportunity. As Michelle went back and forth with the electives' teachers about enrollment in classes, she fostered a stronger relationship with her administrators and invited them into her classroom so that she could reiterate how capable her students were in learning academics. Even though Lindsey found it hard to sustain the reading buddy program, she took advantage of making the coffee shop more inclusive by incorporating general education students alongside of her own. They understood, like Anzaldúa (2002a), that systemic change took time and with knowledge, or *conocimiento*, comes the creation of new realities. Because there were still barriers to inclusion, it signified that the *nepantlera* were still needed on the slash mark between *nos* and *otras*. Seeking to challenge stereotypes and achieve the *nos/otras* imperative, without the slash, will require active, conscious action on the part of the *nepantlera*. These three teachers chose every day to do more than what was asked of them. They could have stayed in their self-contained classrooms, never attended assemblies or field trips, and never ate breakfast or lunch in the cafeteria; but instead, they went above and beyond to insist that their students belonged in those spaces. They helped facilitate greater access within the school community for their students, even when they were met with resistance. In the next chapter, I discuss the implications of this study and suggestions for future research.

5 DISCUSSION

The purpose of my study was to examine the perspectives and experiences of special education teachers related to inclusion and high-quality instruction. Using the narrative inquiry methodology, I focused on the stories and perspectives of my participants, and my analysis process, including the construction of interim texts, helped me develop themes related to my research question. Gloria Anzaldúa's theories of *nos/otras* and *nepantlera* provided a framework for understanding my data. In the following section, I discuss my findings as they relate to my research questions and conceptual framework. I share recommendations and considerations for local schools in developing more inclusive communities, and I make suggestions for future research studies. I close with one final narrative from Miss Honey that explores what *nosotras* could look like in schools.

Anzaldúa's Shift

One of the last major works that Gloria Anzaldúa (2002a) published was a chapter titled *now let us shift...conocimiento...inner works, public acts*. In this text, Anzaldúa described the treacherous path that *nepantlera* take while advocating for change. Anzaldúa's conceptualization of the role of *nepantlera* and *nos/otras* framed my understanding about high-quality instruction and inclusion, and the theories helped me consider the relationship between the self-contained setting and general education setting. *Nos/otras* with the slash was an acknowledgement that the educational system as presently designed is imperfect. *Nos/otras* is not a binary and does not require us to pick only general education or only self-contained. The two parts, *nos* and *otras*,

make up one word and are connected with the slash. The students with severe disabilities in Michelle, Lindsey, and Miss Honey's classes had access to the general education spaces in their schools at times. They did not remain segregated in their self-contained classes all day, but each of the teachers acknowledged that there were barriers to having seamless integration into the school community. Miss Honey's students had complex medical and behavioral needs that were beyond what the general education spaces could support while Michelle and Lindsey recounted experiences when others thought that their students did not belong. The slash in *nos/otras* remained intact for each of the teachers and their students, but Lindsey, Miss Honey, and Michelle still worked to advocate for greater awareness of their students' abilities and found ways that their students could contribute to the school community. The teachers' high-quality instruction helped their students access their community and develop the communication and social skills to engage with others, and their messaging outward into the community of their students' accomplishments helped others consider their students as more than just a disability category.

Inclusion should not simply be a placement of students in one location or another. It should not be a box checked on an IEP at an annual meeting. Inclusion should be the envisionment of a space where difference is honored, and assimilation is not required. Students with severe disabilities can learn skills that help them access their community, but their community also has to be willing to accommodate their uniqueness. Thinking of inclusion in terms of *nos/otras* helps me as the researcher consider what is happening in schools right now that promotes inclusivity and also what work still needs to be done to shift towards a state of *nosotras*. Anzaldúa (2002a) wrote that:

“Las nepantleras advocate a ‘nos/otras’ position—an alliance between ‘us’ and ‘others.’ In nos/otras, the ‘us’ is divided in two, the slash in the middle representing the bridge—the best mutually we can hope for at the moment. Las nepantleras envision a time when the bridge will no longer be needed—we’ll have shifted to a seamless nosotras. This move requires a different way of thinking and relating to others; it requires that we act on our interconnectivity, [...] it includes diverse others and does not depend on traditional categories or sameness. It enacts a retribalization.” (p. 570)

My study addressed what the teachers are doing now, as nepantlera engaged in this kind of advocacy work, so that future work can build on what already exists. There will be times when the nepantlera are met with resistance because separate has been the status quo for so long, and it is easier to maintain the norm than reimagine something new. Miss Honey stated that *the opportunity is a resource*. School communities must all work together to utilize their resources, to rely on their nepantlera to show a better way, and to foster more inclusive school spaces that have the capacity to accommodate all. As our nation becomes more and more diverse, schools must consider if and how they are building inclusive communities. When systems are designed for the majority, some groups will always be left out. Students with severe disabilities have historically been situated on the fringes, but just because it has been that way in the past does not mean that it cannot be changed for the future. Inclusion is messy because there is no clear model for how it should work, but remaining in self-contained spaces because it is more convenient, or it is what has always been done is not an excuse to maintain the status quo. If nos/otras with the slash is the best we can hope for in this moment, then school communities need to work to ensure that when the opportunity is available, they take advantage of the resource. In the next sections, I discuss the general education and self-contained spaces in terms of privilege and

access, how spaces need to be accessible and accommodating, and recommendations for fostering inclusive school communities. I am intentionally developing these recommendations for individual school personnel to consider how their spaces can be more inclusive. Federal and state legislation, as well as district procedures, must also be interrogated to ensure their policies promote and support greater inclusivity, but I believe that school leaders should not wait for these sweeping reforms to foster more inclusive school communities.

Privilege of the General Education and Stereotypes of Self-Contained Spaces

Throughout the research process, I reflected on the general education setting and the inherent privilege some students had in their ability to autonomously access their school community. Miss Honey, Michelle, and Linsey's students did not have guaranteed access to general education spaces, and almost all of the learning experiences the students had were mediated by the special education teachers based on what the teachers were able to plan and advocate for within their school. General education classes and curriculum are designed for general education students, and the students in that space are innately granted access upon enrollment in the school. It is only when the general education students are seen as academically or behaviorally unsuccessful that anyone begins to question whether a different kind of placement is necessary. The general education classroom was the original learning space, and special education came out of a push in the 1970s to also educate those with disabilities; but by that time, the educational system was already in place and fitted for the norm population (Harris, 2006). Inclusion is the acknowledgement that the system was designed for some students, not all. The need to categorize the times when students with and without disabilities are learning together as 'inclusion' reflects the imperfection in the system. Inclusion is a term needed in our educational system because it is a break from the norm.

Unlike the general education classroom, the self-contained special education classroom does not fundamentally hold the same privilege of being perceived as an academically rigorous learning environment. It is the place for the few students who need something different than what occurs in the mainstream. Miss Honey, Michelle, and Lindsey described perceptions of their colleagues and visitors from the district who seemed surprised that their self-contained classrooms were spaces of academic learning. They pushed back on the stereotype others held of self-contained classes with how they messaged out their students' abilities and accomplishments.

When the special education teachers needed to step out of their spaces, they were dependent on someone else to collaborate with them. None of the teachers discussed general education teachers seeking them out to have general education students visit the self-contained classes. The only time students without disabilities entering into self-contained classes was discussed was with Lindsey's unsustainable book buddies' program where she acknowledged that the *teachers just aren't super open to having their kids come and do that* and Michelle's student intern program where the students earn credits to *learn the position of a paraprofessional*. The self-contained class did not hold the same privilege as the general education class, but the self-contained class was a space where the students with severe disabilities were accommodated. Unlike the general education classes, the self-contained class had a smaller number of students, so students with severe disabilities received more individualized, intensive high-quality instruction tailored to their interests and experiences. The teachers were able to offer repetitive, hands-on instruction using a curriculum that was designed for students with severe disabilities (Unique Learning Systems). Their lessons incorporated movement, and they avoided what Michelle described as *boring paper and pen all day*. While their students participated in end-of-year assessments, the tests were not considered as high-

stakes as those in general education, so there was not the additional pressure and disruption to normal schedules like in the general education classes. The self-contained classes were designed around the strengths and needs of the students with severe disabilities, so they were accommodating, but not inclusive.

Each special education teacher in this study was situated in a different school context and had different kinds of opportunities for high-quality instruction and inclusion. The teachers used their high-quality instructional practices to build opportunities for their students to participate in real-world learning experiences. At times, some of the teachers were then able to push that instruction out into the school community. Lindsey taught engaging lessons on plants and then was able to collaborate with her school's STEAM specialist to arrange more hands-on and inclusive learning experiences, like the school butterfly garden project. Miss Honey used a social story about attending a school assembly in her ELA lessons and then ensured that her students attended the school-wide events. Michelle had less access to take her instruction outside of her classroom, so instead she worked to ensure that her students were prepared for their post-graduation shift to the transition program.

If the special education teachers and their students had more inherent access to the general education spaces and those spaces were accommodating to the needs of the students with severe disabilities, the students would stand to have even more opportunities for inclusive, high-quality instruction with their peers. For this kind of inclusion to be achieved, there needs to be collaboration between general education and special education teachers. Special education teachers are already experts at modifying academic curriculum for their students' unique learning needs; but for this instruction to be delivered in a general education setting with peers, the general and special education teachers need adequate time to plan, collaborate, and develop

instruction that is able to be delivered to a variety of learners achieving at different levels. Through this collaboration, special education teachers could advocate for their students' abilities and plan meaningful ways that their students can participate in general education lessons, instead of being a guest to the learning. Special education teachers understand how to accommodate their students' needs and modify curriculum to ensure the instruction is relevant and connected to the students' real-world learning experiences. Their modifications could even assist students in general education who are struggling to master the content or English Language Learning students who could benefit from some additional visual supports to build comprehension.

Accessible but Not Accommodating

Michelle, Lindsey, and Miss Honey had control over what happened in their learning spaces, but when the teachers wanted their students included in general education classrooms or school-wide events, there were often barriers. Even when the general education spaces were accessible, there was no guarantee that they would be accommodating to the students with severe disabilities. I saw this notion of accessible but not accommodating particularly with Michelle's description of the *VIP section* at assemblies where her students were included, but only on the fringes in a designated space. What if the students wanted to sit with their general education friends? What if they arrived late to the event and did not want to walk through the entire audience to get to their designated space? By isolating them in a VIP section, Michelle's students were able to attend the school-wide event, but not afforded the opportunity to engage naturally in the same way that their general education peers were.

Accessible but not accommodating was also an undertone of Miss Honey's description of utilizing the office staff to collect survey data to make a graph. She stated that *we can do that without disrupting an actual classroom. We can go into a classroom and join in on what they're doing, but when we need to do something different*, they visited the office to complete the task.

When Miss Honey's students were visitors in a general education classroom, they were subject to whatever activities were already planned in that class. It would be a disruption if they walked into the general education class and stopped instruction to collect data on what everyone's favorite ice cream flavor was so that they could go back to their self-contained class and make a graph; however, this was something that they could do relatively seamlessly by visiting the office staff.

Lindsey's coffee shop provided a glimpse of an activity in the school building that was both accessible and accommodating for her students. The coffee shop was an initiative that she started with her fellow self-contained teachers so that they could generalize academic and communication skills taught in the classroom as well as raise funds for field trips in the community. Over time, the success of the coffee shop allowed her to expand it into an inclusive opportunity for her students and general education students to work cooperatively together and foster stronger relationships. The questions that stakeholders should ask is, not just whether a space within the school is accessible to students with severe disabilities, but whether or not that space is accommodating to students with severe disabilities—accommodating of the students' needs as well as their interests, talents, and abilities.

Lindsey's success with the inclusive coffee shop supports the notion that special education teachers should be actively involved in plans to foster a more inclusive school community for students with severe disabilities. Special education teachers are expected to know how to accommodate the unique needs of their students in any space. School personnel should ensure that when they are planning school-wide events that special education teachers are consulted for their expertise. Special education teachers understand the unique needs that their students possess and can offer their recommendations to ensure that experiences across the

school settings are able to be accommodating to all learners. Leaders should not assume that students with severe disabilities need to be separated into a VIP section. Students with severe disabilities may require some accommodations that their general education peers do not; but with accommodations, they should still have equitable access to all school events. Special events and assemblies are opportunities to bring the student-body together and build community. These are important inclusive opportunities where students with severe disabilities should be able to engage with their general education peers. The more opportunities for students with severe disabilities to come out of their self-contained classrooms and engage with the rest of the student-body ensures that general education students have more chances to develop meaningful friendships with their fellow students. Inclusion then becomes not just a placement of students in one space or another, but a community that learns from one another.

Reimagining Inclusion as More Than an IEP Segment

‘Inclusion’ as an educational concept acknowledges that students with severe disabilities are inherently positioned as outsiders, and they must actively be included into something that they could not autonomously access. The most basic definition of inclusion describes a space where students with and without disabilities are learning alongside of each other, typically in a general education classroom (Wehmeyer et al., 2017). Linsey defined inclusion as *not just inclusion with non-disabled peers; it’s including them in all aspects of their school environment. It is finding those things that people don’t think that we can do, and giving them ideas of how we can help.* Michelle expressed that inclusion means to her *everybody equal opportunity. Equal opportunity, equal chance, allow people to fail. Let everyone try, and if you fail, that’s why I’m here to help you. Inclusion means everybody plays their part; everybody works as hard as they possibly can.* Miss Honey stated that inclusion had two parts: *the first part is anything that prepares [students with disabilities] and educates them to interact with the world outside of*

special ed[ucation]. The second part of it is educating people who are outside the special ed[ucation] community, outside of our classrooms, who might not understand how much our kids can do and how much our kids have to give and have to offer. Anytime I'm educating the outside population about what our kids can do, [it] is also inclusion. Each of the teachers acknowledge that there should be more to the conceptualization of inclusion than simply grouping students with and without disabilities together. Students' IEP documents that lists which academic segments take place in self-contained or inclusive settings does not account for the ways that students with severe disabilities are accepted and included into the school community.

Through their advocacy, the teachers acknowledged that there must be an unlearning of stereotypic beliefs about who people with severe disabilities are as well as an acceptance of the differences that these students possess. Even when this kind of learning and unlearning is achieved, it will still be challenging to ensure the sustained success of any inclusion initiative. The general educational system itself was not designed for students with severe disabilities, and some students with severe disabilities will always have needs that are far greater than what the general education space is designed to accommodate. Anzaldúa's theory of *nos/otras* reiterates that these two parts make up a whole and are not an either/or binary where one has to exclusively be chosen over the other. The teachers in this study described how their students, at times, had violent behavioral outbursts, extensive medical needs, and toileting needs that would interrupt their normal scheduled academics. Even though these needs existed, it did not mean that the general education setting was always off limits, just that there were times where the self-contained setting could better accommodate those needs. Until the general education spaces are fully equipped and staffed to accommodate these kinds of behavioral and medical needs, a self-contained space will be a part of the *nos/otras*.

School administrators should help build a school community that fosters inclusive opportunities for students with and without disabilities as well as opportunities that allow general education teachers to meet and interact with students with severe disabilities. Miss Honey, Lindsey, and Michelle saw part of their responsibility as special education teachers as promoters of their students' abilities. School leaders should emphasize fostering inclusive experiences where those not typically in contact with students with severe disabilities have opportunities to interact and engage with these students. Professional development and staff training will not build the same kind of empathy and acceptance as having genuine experiences with students with severe disabilities. The more opportunities within the school for all to interact in meaningful ways where everyone has something to contribute and the opportunity to learn from one another, the stronger the inclusive community could be.

Lindsey, Michelle, and Miss Honey described common spaces within their school buildings that their students sometimes had access to visiting, such as the library, cafeteria, gymnasium, playground in elementary, auditorium in high school, and outdoor greenspaces. None of these spaces were specifically listed on students' IEP documents, even though these could be spaces for naturally occurring inclusion. These common areas should always be available and accommodating to students with severe disabilities. School administrators as well as the leaders of those common spaces—the cafeteria managers, media specialists, and coaches—should communicate with the special education teachers about how to ensure equitable access for their students. Miss Honey understood that even though one of her students loved going to the gymnasium when students were playing basketball, there were sometimes *safety issues* related to those visits. It was okay to visit the gym *when it's sixth graders, but when it's eighth graders, then it's too dangerous for her because they're not big enough to be aware of*

other people, but they're not small enough not to be dangerous to her. Special education teachers can collaborate with these leaders to break down structural and other kinds of barriers that make it harder to sustain inclusion in these common spaces. If cafeteria managers, media specialists, and coaches look around their common spaces and do not see the students with severe disabilities, they should consider what about their space could be keeping these students from accessing it. There may be instances where what has been done for years needs to be reimagined because it is not serving all students equitably. Throughout recorded history, people with severe disabilities have been positioned as outsiders, or *otras*, within their communities (Brown et al., 2017; Harris, 2006; Mutua et al. 2011). School systems denied students with severe disabilities access to academic instruction because it was assumed that they were incapable of learning academics (Barr, 1904; Wehmeyer et al., 2017). These false assumptions about students with severe disabilities must continue to be challenged so that the barriers to equitable access can be removed.

Suggestions for Future Research

Throughout my doctoral journey, my cohort and I were reminded that qualitative research is not generalizable, but a lack of generalizability does not equate to a limitation of a research study. The collective voices of special education teachers through qualitative research can provide insight into a profession that is more often studied through quantitative lenses.

Researchers interested in special education teachers' high-quality instructional practices and inclusive school communities should utilize qualitative research methods that offer rich, thick descriptions of the context (Geertz, 1977). More research is needed on the process of developing and sustaining inclusive school communities for students with and without disabilities.

Ethnographic research studies could explore how attitudes and mindsets of school personnel shift over time, what roles stakeholders have in building more inclusive spaces, and what observable

changes occur within the school community. Studies that utilize discourse analysis could explore how language is used in interactions between special education teachers and students with severe disabilities during instruction (Gee, 2005) because how the academic instruction is presented to the students includes more than just what instructional materials are used. Additionally, qualitative studies that use critical feminist theories, such as Anzaldúa's theories of *nos/otras* and *nepantlera*, can highlight the inequities that marginalized communities continue to experience in schools as well as the broader community. Anzaldúa's theories challenge cultural norms and encourage people within communities to engage in activism work to challenge the status quo and stereotypes that hold some in places of privilege over others. While my study focused on the experiences and perspectives of special education teachers, future studies should magnify the voices of students with severe disabilities. These students are often inactive participants in the decisions that are made about them, so it is vital to spotlight their perspectives, especially if schools and districts do consider reimagining educational models.

Final Thoughts

When I set out on this doctoral journey, I was most interested in learning from other special education teachers in positions like mine. As I read research studies about special education teacher dispositions (Howell & Gengel, 2005; Petersen, 2016; Ruppert et al., 2017), I found myself wondering, "If this is who special education teachers are, then what are they doing?" I was drawn to teachers' instructional practices for a practical reason—learning how others do the same job as me will help me be a better teacher. The research question about inclusion found me as I traced the historical situation of people with severe disabilities, always on the fringes of society. Michelle, Lindsey, and Miss Honey's experiences built this study, and they also shaped my identity as a teacher and researcher. At times during our interviews, I deviated from my interview guide to ask a follow-up question that I, as a special education

teacher, had because I experienced a similar situation and wanted to know their approach. I found solace in learning from these exceptional educators, and when I came back to school in August. Even in the midst of a pandemic, I had a renewed outlook on my position as a teacher of students with moderate intellectual disabilities and hope for what I could accomplish. I carry their stories with me and am grateful that I had the opportunity to peek into their worlds and learn from other *nepantlera*.

As I reflect on the entirety of this qualitative research study, I cannot help but consider the historical trajectory of students with severe disabilities. The signing of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 into law was neither the starting, nor the ending point, of the story of people with severe disabilities. While assuredly monumental legislation, there was still more work to be done after it became law, and there remains to this day more work to be done. Anzaldúa (2015a) wrote of the fissures that exist on the bridge connecting *nos* and *otras*, and it is through these cracks that the light shines in, and *nepantlera* use this light to guide us into a new reality. Miss Honey, Michelle, and Linsey helped me consider how Anzaldúa's writings related to the context of special education and students with severe disabilities. Their honest perspectives acknowledged the imperfect system that exists for their students; and yet, the hope and positivity that radiated from each teacher, in spite of the barriers, gave me a sense of optimism for the future. It was Michelle who stated that a system that has been maintained for a long time will not change overnight. It was once thought that students with severe disabilities required no more instruction than basic developmental skills such as learning the alphabet and putting pegs in pegboards (Downing, 2010). These teachers' high-quality instructional practices provided their students opportunities to learn about topics that were never accessible to students with severe disabilities in the past. Their instruction helped their students engage in the

community around them and challenge stereotypic thinking about what students with severe disabilities were capable of learning. They held high expectations for their students, saw their students as active learners, and fostered learning environments that were far beyond what others thought were possible. Their nepantlera advocacy ensured a more accessible and accommodating educational experience for their students, and even though the story is not complete, even though nosotras without the slash may not be achieved yet, I feel grateful for teachers like Miss Honey, Michelle, and Lindsey who continue to advocate for a better future for their students. I close this study, not with my words alone, but with one final narrative from Miss Honey that speaks to an inclusive nosotras school community.

Failed CBI and Santa

Miss Honey's class was scheduled to go on a community-based instruction (CBI) trip to the mall one day in December. On the trip, they planned to visit the mall Santa, buy Christmas ornaments, and purchase and eat lunch in the food court. When it was time for her class and the other self-contained classes to make their way out to the bus, no bus showed up. The students and teachers disappointedly returned to their class with little hope of being able to reschedule the trip so close to the winter break. The school nurse had a friend, who happened to be a professional Santa, visiting the school the same day. When the nurse heard that the trip was cancelled, she asked her friend if he would be willing to run home, get his Santa suit, and come back to the school so that the students could still have some sort of Santa experience.

Miss Honey notified her students' parents that the trip was cancelled, and unbeknownst to her, one of the parents rushed to the store and bought a Christmas tree, ornaments, hot chocolate, and other holiday supplies and headed to the school. When the parent arrived at the school and checked in at the front office, the front office staff immediately also sprang into action. With the help of general education students, they transformed a spare classroom into a wonderland just in

time for Santa to arrive. Miss Honey was taken aback by the kindness of others and remarked that *the whole school community kind of came together and threw this thing together, like 'these kids are gonna see Santa!'* Parents, school staff, general education students, and volunteers came together on that day to create an experience for Miss Honey's students that was far greater than the one that they had planned on their CBI trip.

The following year, Miss Honey recreated the in-school Santa trip and used it as an opportunity to practice for the CBI trip to the mall. General education students and Miss Honey's students collaborated, using specialized writing software, to write letters to Santa. They shared holiday snacks and were able to have a structured visit with Santa in school so that when they visited the mall, a less familiar and predictable setting, the students already had prior experiences to help them be successful out in the community.

When Miss Honey first told me the Santa story, I felt the weight of its significance in connection with my study. A portion of the school community essentially abandoned their typical responsibilities and channeled all of their efforts into making this day memorable for the students in the self-contained classes. In these moments, standardized testing did not matter. The learning objective was not posted on the wall, and no one was relying on scripted curriculum to guide the instruction. Everyone attending the Santa party had an opportunity to learn and engage with each other, and then Miss Honey's students were able to take that knowledge and apply it into another setting when they went to the mall. This experience allowed more people from the school community to build a relationship with Miss Honey's students, and everyone worked together to create an enjoyable learning experience for all. Anzaldúa (2015a) believed that through shared experiences, we can move past the either/or binary ways of thinking about our

differences and instead embrace the ‘and’ that connects us all together in one community where people with disabilities and people without disabilities do more than coexist—they belong.

REFERENCES

- Alberto, P. A., Waugh, R. E., & Fredrick, L. D. (2010). Teaching the reading of connected text through sight-word instruction to students with moderate intellectual disabilities. *Research in Developmental Disabilities, 31*(6), 1467-1474.
doi:10.1016/j.ridd.2010.06.011
- Anzaldúa, G. E. (2000a). Last words? Spirit journeys: An interview with AnaLouise Keating (1998-1999). In A. Keating (Ed.), *Gloria E. Anzaldúa: Interviews/Entrevistas* (pp. 281-291). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Anzaldúa, G. E. (2000b). Quincentennial: From victimhood to active resistance: Inés Hernández-Ávila y Gloria E. Anzaldúa (1991). In A. Keating (Ed.), *Gloria E. Anzaldúa: Interviews/Entrevistas* (pp. 177-194). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Anzaldúa, G. E. (2000c). Toward a mestiza rhetoric: Gloria Anzaldúa on composition, postcoloniality, and the spiritual: An interview with Andrea Lunsford (1996). In A. Keating (Ed.), *Gloria E. Anzaldúa: Interviews/Entrevistas* (pp. 251-280). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Anzaldúa, G. E. (2002a). now let us shift...the path of conocimiento...inner work, public acts. In G. Anzaldúa & A. Keating (Eds.), *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation* (pp. 540-576). New York, NY: Routledge.

- Anzaldúa, G. E. (2002b). (Un)natural bridges, (un)safe spaces. In G. Anzaldúa & A. Keating (Eds.), *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation* (pp. 1-5). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Anzaldúa, G. E. (2012). *Borderlands/La frontera: The new mestiza* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.
- Anzaldúa, G. E. (2015a). Geography of selves--Reimagining identity: nos/otras (us/other), las nepantleras, and the new tribalism. In A. Keating (Ed.), *Light in the dark/Luz en lo oscuro: Rewriting identity, spirituality, reality* (pp. 65-94). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Anzaldúa, G. E. (2015b). Let us be the healing of the wound: The coyolxauhqui imperative--La sombra y el sueño. In A. Keating (Ed.), *Light in the dark/Luz en lo oscuro: Rewriting identity, spirituality, reality* (pp. 9-22). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ashbaker, B. Y. (2011). History of legal and legislative acts concerned with special education. In A. F. Rotatori, F. E. Obiakor, & J. P. Bakken (Eds.), *History of special education* (Vol. 21, pp. 21-45). Bingley, UK: Emerald Group.
- Ayres, K. M., Lowrey, K. A., Douglas, K. H., & Sievers, C. (2011). I can identify Saturn but I can't brush my teeth: What happens when the curricular focus for students with severe disabilities shifts. *Education & Training in Autism & Developmental Disabilities*, 46(1), 11-21.
- Bach, M. (2017). Changing perspectives on intellectual and developmental disabilities. In M. L. Wehmeyer, I. Brown, M. Percy, W. L. A. Fung, & K. A. Shogren (Eds.), *A comprehensive guide to intellectual and developmental disabilities* (pp. 35-45). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

- Baglieri, S., & Shapiro, A. (2012). *Disability studies and the inclusive classroom: Critical practices for creating least restrictive attitudes*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Barr, M. W. (1904). *Mental defectives*. Philadelphia, PA: Blakiston's Sons & Co.
- Billingsley, B. S. (2004). Promoting teacher quality and retention in special education. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 37*(5), 370-376.
- Billingsley, B. S. (2007). A case study of special education teacher attrition in an urban district. *Journal of Special Education Leadership, 20*(1), 11-20.
- Binger, C., & Kent-Walsh, J. (2017). Augmentative and alternative communication. In M. L. Wehmeyer, I. Brown, M. Percy, W. L. A. Fung, & K. A. Shogren (Eds.), *A comprehensive guide to intellectual and developmental disabilities* (pp. 461-471). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.
- Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. (2007). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Bouck, E., Park, J., & Nickell, B. (2017). Using the concrete-representational-abstract approach to support students with intellectual disability to solve change-making problems. *Research in Developmental Disabilities, 60*, 24-36. doi:10.1016/j.ridd.2016.11.006
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101.
- Brown, I., Radford, J., & Wehmeyer, M. (2017). Historical overview of intellectual and developmental disabilities. In M. L. Wehmeyer, I. Brown, M. Percy, W. L. A. Fung, & K. A. Shogren (Eds.), *A comprehensive guide to intellectual and developmental disabilities* (pp. 19-34). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.
- Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

- Buck v. Bell, 274 U.S. 200 (1927).
- Cameron, D. L., & Cook, B. G. (2013). General education teachers' goals and expectations for their included students with mild and severe disabilities. *Education & Training in Autism & Developmental Disabilities, 48*(1), 18-30.
- Casey, K. (1995). The new narrative research in education. *Review of Research in Education, 21*, 211-253.
- Clandinin, D. J. (2013). *Engaging in narrative inquiry*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Courduff, J., Szapkiw, A., & Wendt, J. L. (2016). Grounded in what works: Exemplary practice in special education teachers' technology integration. *Journal of Special Education Technology, 31*(1), 26-38. doi:10.1177/0162643416633333
- Courtade, G., Gurney, B. N., & Carden, R. (2017). Using read-alouds of grade-level social studies text and systematic prompting to promote comprehension for students with severe disabilities. *The Journal of Social Studies Research, 41*(4), 291-301.
doi:10.1016/j.jssr.2017.05.002
- Courtade, G., Spooner, F., Browder, D., & Jimenez, B. (2012). Seven reasons to promote standards-based instruction for students with severe disabilities: A reply to Ayres, Lowrey, Douglas, & Sievers (2011). *Education & Training in Autism & Developmental Disabilities, 47*(1), 3-13.
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research meaning and perspective in the research process*. London, UK: SAGE.

- DeWalt, K., & DeWalt, B. (2011). *Participant observation: A guide for fieldworkers* (2nd ed.). Lanham, MD: AltaMira.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Downing, J. E. (2005). *Teaching literacy to students with significant disabilities: Strategies for the k-12 inclusive classroom*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Downing, J. E. (2010). *Academic instruction for students with moderate and severe intellectual disabilities in inclusive classrooms*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Downing, J. E., & Peckham-Hardin, K. D. (2007). Inclusive education: What makes it a good education for students with moderate to severe disabilities? *Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 32(1), 16-30.
- Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1401 *et seq.* C.F.R. (1975).
- Egbert, J., & Sanden, S. (2014). *Foundations of education research: Understanding theoretical components*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Erevelles, N. (2005). Rewriting critical pedagogy from the periphery: Materiality, disability, and the politics of schooling. In S. L. Gabel (Ed.), *Disability studies in education: Readings in theory and method* (pp. 65-83). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 *et seq.* C.F.R. (2015).
- Gee, J. P. (2005). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Geertz, C. (1977). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Grenier, M., Miller, N., & Black, K. (2017). Applying universal design for learning and the inclusion spectrum for students with severe disabilities in general physical education. *The Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 88(6), 51-56.

- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2004). Competing paradigms in qualitative research: Theories and issues. In S. N. Hesse-Biber & P. Leavy (Eds.), *Approaches to qualitative research: A reader on theory and practice*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Harris, J. C. (2006). *Intellectual disability: Understanding its development, causes, classification, evaluation, and treatment*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Howell, J. J., & Gengel, S. (2005). Perspectives of effective teachers of students with low-incidence disabilities. *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*, 1(4).
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* C.F.R. (1997).
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* C.F.R. (2004).
- Johnson-Bailey, J. (2004). Enjoining positionality and power in narrative work: Balancing contentious and modulating forces. In K. deMarrais & S. D. Lapan (Eds.), *Foundations for research: Methods of inquiry in education and the social sciences* (pp. 123-138). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Jones, P., & Lawson, H. (2015). Insights into teacher learning about pedagogy from an international group of teachers of students with severe intellectual disabilities. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 30(3), 384-401.
- Kaff, M. S. (2004). Multitasking is multitaxing: Why special educators are leaving the field. *Preventing School Failure*, 48(2), 10-17.
- Kantor, H., & Lowe, R. (2013). Educating the welfare state and privatizing education: The evolution of social policy since the New Deal. In P. L. Carter & K. G. Welner (Eds.), *Closing the opportunity gap: What America must do to give every child an even chance* (pp. 25-39). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

- Kasun, G. S. (2015). Teacher education nepantlera work: Connecting cracks-between-worlds with Mormon university students. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 17(3), 91-106.
- Keating, A. (2006). From borderlands and new mestiza to nepantlas and nepantleras: Anzaldúa theories for social change. *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-knowledge*, 4(Summer), 5-16.
- Keating, A. (Ed.) (2015). *Light in the dark/Luz en lo oscuro: Rewriting identity, spirituality, reality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Kennette, L. N., & Wilson, N. A. (2019). Universal design for learning (UDL): What is it and how do I implement it? *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching & Learning Journal*, 12(1), 1-6.
- Kliwer, C., Biklen, D., & Petersen, A. J. (2015). At the end of intellectual disability. *Harvard Educational Review*, 85(1), 1-28.
- Koegeler-Abdi, M. (2013). Shifting subjectivities: Mestizas, nepantleras, and Gloria Anzaldúa's legacy. *MELUS*, 38(2), 71-88. doi:10.1093/melus/mlt016
- Kramp, M. K. (2004). Exploring life and experience through narrative inquiry. In K. deMarrais & S. D. Lapan (Eds.), *Foundations for research: Methods of inquiry in education and the social sciences* (pp. 103-121). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Ladd, H. F. (2017). No Child Left Behind: A deeply flawed federal policy. *Journal of Policy Analysis & Management*, 36(2), 461-469. doi:10.1002/pam.21978
- Lawson, H., & Jones, P. (2018). Teachers' pedagogical decision-making and influences on this when teaching students with severe intellectual disabilities. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 18(3), 196-210. doi:10.1111/1471-3802.12405

- Lowrey, K. A., Hollingshead, A., & Howery, K. (2017). A closer look: Examining teachers' language around udl, inclusive classrooms, and intellectual disability. *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 55*(1), 15-24. doi:10.1352/1934-9556-55.1.15
- Matzen, K., Ryndak, D., & Nakao, T. (2010). Middle school teams increasing access to general education for students with significant disabilities: Issues encountered and activities observed across contexts. *Remedial and Special Education, 31*(4), 287-304.
- McLeskey, J., & Billingsley, B. S. (2008). How does the quality and stability of the teaching force influence the research-to-practice gap? A perspective on the teacher shortage in special education. *Remedial & Special Education, 29*(5), 293-305.
doi:10.1177/0741932507312010
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia, 348 F. Supp. 866 (1972).
- Mutua, K., Siders, J., & Bakken, J. P. (2011). History of intellectual disabilities. In A. F. Rotatori, F. E. Obiakor, & J. P. Bakken (Eds.), *History of special education* (Vol. 21, pp. 89-117). Bingley, UK: Emerald Group.
- No Child Left Behind Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 *et seq.* C.F.R. (2001).
- Obiakor, F. E. (2011). Historical and contemporary contexts, challenges, and prospects in the education of students with exceptionalities. In A. F. Rotatori, F. E. Obiakor, & J. P. Bakken (Eds.), *History of special education* (Vol. 21, pp. 363-378). Bingley, UK: Emerald Group.

- Olson, A., Leko, M. M., & Roberts, C. A. (2016). Providing students with severe disabilities access to the general education curriculum. *Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 41*(3), 143-157. doi:10.1177/1540796916651975
- Osgood, R. L. (2005). *The history of inclusion in the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press.
- Osgood, R. L. (2008). *The history of special education: A struggle for equality in American public schools*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Palmer, D. J., Stough, L. M., Burdenski, J. T. K., & Gonzales, M. (2005). Identifying teacher expertise: An examination of researchers' decision making. *Educational Psychologist, 40*(1), 13-25. doi:10.1207/s15326985ep4001_2
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pennington, R. C. (2016). Write on! Using assistive technology and systematic instruction to teach sentence writing to students with moderate to severe disability. *Journal of Special Education Technology, 31*(1), 50-57. doi:10.1177/01626434166333360
- Pennington, R. C., Collins, B. C., Stenhoff, D. M., Turner, K., & Gunselman, K. (2014). Using simultaneous prompting and computer-assisted instruction to teach narrative writing skills to students with autism. *Education & Training in Autism & Developmental Disabilities, 49*(3), 396-414.
- Pennington, R. C., Courtade, G., Ault, M. J., & Delano, M. (2016). Five essential features of quality educational programs for students with moderate and severe intellectual disability: A guide for administrators. *Education & Training in Autism & Developmental Disabilities, 51*(3), 294-306.

- Pennington, R. C., Flick, A., & Smith-Wehr, K. (2018). The use of response prompting and frames for teaching sentence writing to students with moderate intellectual disability. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 33*(3), 142-149.
- Pennington, R. C., & Koehler, M. (2017). Effects of modeling, story templates, and self-graphing in the use of story elements by students with moderate intellectual disability. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities, 52*(3), 280-290.
- Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 343 F. Supp. 279 (1972).
- Peshkin, A. (1988). In search of subjectivity: One's own. *Educational Researcher, 17*(7), 17-21.
- Petersen, A. (2016). Perspectives of special education teachers on general education curriculum access. *Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 41*(1), 19-35.
doi:10.1177/1540796915604835
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1995). Narrative configuration as qualitative analysis. In J. A. Hatch & R. Wisniewski (Eds.), *Life history and narrative* (pp. 5-25). London, UK: Falmer Press.
- Polloway, E. A., Bouck, E. C., & Yang, L. (2019). Educational programs for students with intellectual disability: Demographic patterns. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities, 54*(1), 30-40.
- Redfield, S. E., & Kraft, T. (2012). What color is special education? *Journal of Law & Education, 41*(1), 129-200.
- Reynolds, M. C. (1962). Framework for considering some issues in special education. *Exceptional Children, 28*(7), 367-370.
- Riessman, C. K. (1993). *Narrative analysis*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

- Riessman, C. K. (2004). Narrative analysis. In A. Lewis-Beck & T. F. Liao (Eds.), *The Sage encyclopedia of social science research methods* (Vol. 1, pp. 706-709). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rivera, C. J., & Baker, J. N. (2013). Teaching students with intellectual disability to solve for x. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 46*(2), 14-21. doi:10.1177/004005991304600202
- Roberts, C. A., & Leko, M. M. (2013). Integrating functional and academic goals into literacy instruction for adolescents with significant cognitive disabilities through shared story reading. *Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 38*(3), 157-172. doi:10.1177/154079691303800303
- Roberts, C. A., Leko, M. M., & Wilkerson, K. L. (2013). New directions in reading instruction for adolescents with significant cognitive disabilities. *Remedial & Special Education, 34*(5), 305-317. doi:10.1177/0741932513485447
- Roberts, C. A., Ruppard, A. L., & Olson, A. J. (2018). Perceptions matter: Administrators' vision of instruction for students with severe disabilities. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 43*(1), 3-19.
- Roulston, K. (2010). *Reflective interviewing: A guide to theory and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ruppard, A. L. (2017). "Without being able to read, what's literacy mean to them?": Situated beliefs about literacy for students with significant disabilities. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 67*, 114-124. doi:10.1016/j.tate.2017.06.003
- Ruppard, A. L., Roberts, C. A., & Olson, A. J. (2017). Perceptions about expert teaching for students with severe disabilities among teachers identified as experts. *Research &*

Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 42(2), 121-135.

doi:10.1177/1540796917697311

Ryndak, D. L., Jackson, L., & Billingsley, F. (2000). Defining school inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities: What do experts say? *Exceptionality*, 8(2), 101-116.

doi:10.1207/S15327035EX0802_2

Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Salend, S. J., & Garrick Duhaney, L. M. (2011). Historical and philosophical changes in the education of students with exceptionalities. In A. F. Rotatori, F. E. Obiakor, & J. P. Bakken (Eds.), *History of special education* (Vol. 21, pp. 1-20). Bingley, UK: Emerald Group.

Saunders, A. F., Spooner, F., Browder, D., Wakeman, S., & Lee, A. (2013). Teaching the Common Core in English language arts to students with severe disabilities. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 46(2), 22-33.

Scheerenberger, R. C. (1987). *A history of mental retardation: A quarter century of promise*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

Spooner, F., McKissick, B. R., Knight, V., & Walker, R. (2014). Teaching science concepts. In D. M. Browder & F. Spooner (Eds.), *More language arts, math, and science for students with severe disabilities*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

Spooner, F., McKissick, B. R., & Knight, V. F. (2017). Establishing the state of affairs for evidence-based practices in students with severe disabilities. *Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 42(1), 8-18. doi:10.1177/1540796916684896

State ex Rel. Beattie v. Board of Education of the City of Antigo, 169 Wis. 231 (1919).

- Stough, L. M., & Palmer, D. J. (2003). Special thinking in special settings: A qualitative study of expert special educators. *Journal of Special Education, 36*(4), 206-222.
doi:10.1177/002246690303600402
- Sultana, F. (2007). Reflexivity, positionality and participatory ethics: Negotiating fieldwork dilemmas in international research. *An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies, 6*(3), 374-385.
- Sutcher, L., Darling-Hammond, L., & Carver-Thomas, D. (2016). A coming crisis in teaching? Teacher supply, demand, and shortages in the U.S. In. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.
- Timberlake, M. T. (2014). Weighing costs and benefits: Teacher interpretation and implementation of access to the general education curriculum. *Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 39*(2), 83-99. doi:10.1177/1540796914544547
- Turnbull, H. R., Turnbull, A. P., Wehmeyer, M. L., & Park, J. (2003). A quality of life framework for special education outcomes. *Remedial & Special Education, 24*(2), 67-74.
doi:10.1177/07419325030240020201
- Vogt, W. P., Gardner, D. C., & Haeffele, L. M. (2012). *When to use what research design*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Wehmeyer, M., Shogren, K. A., & Brown, I. (2017). Education for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. In M. L. Wehmeyer, I. Brown, M. Percy, W. L. A. Fung, & K. A. Shogren (Eds.), *A comprehensive guide to intellectual and developmental disabilities* (pp. 527-540). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.
- Winzer, M. A. (2009). *From integration to inclusion: A history of special education in the 20th century*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University.

Zaytoun, K. (2011). Shifting. In A. Keating & G. González-López (Eds.), *Bridging: How Gloria Anzaldúa's life and work transformed our own* (pp. 204-209). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

Georgia State University

Informed Consent

Title: Stories from the Bridge: A Narrative Inquiry of Special Education Teachers' Experiences with Inclusion and High-Quality Instruction for Students with Severe Disabilities

Principal Investigator: Dr. DaShaunda Patterson

Student Principal Investigator: Rebecca Lane Eswine

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the ways that low-incidence special education teachers engage in inclusive practices and quality-instruction and how they reflect and perceive this process. You are invited to take part in this research study because you self-identify as a teacher who provides inclusive and meaningful learning opportunities for your students, and you are identified as an expert low-incidence special education teacher. Between 2-5 people will be invited to take part in this study.

Procedures

If you decide to take part, you will participate in an initial conversation, two interviews, and one observation.

Study participation will span three months.

The interviews will be audio recorded.

You will only interact with the Student Principal Investigator.

The observation will take place during an instructional time of your choice. Interviews will take place in person at a location that is convenient for you.

You will have the opportunity to share lesson plans, photographs, and instructional materials.

You will have opportunities to review the data and provide feedback.

Participation in the entire study will take between 190-250 minutes of your time.

Future Research

Researchers will not use or distribute your data for future research studies even if identifiers are removed.

Risks

In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would in a normal day of life.

Benefits

This study is not designed to benefit you personally. Overall, we hope to gain information about how expert low-incidence special education teachers approach including their students within the broader school context and provide the students with meaningful learning opportunities. This understanding could be used to develop more effective professional development opportunities for novice low-incidence special education teachers.

Alternatives

The alternative to taking part in this study is to not take part in the study.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. You may refuse to take part in the study or stop at any time, this will not cause you to lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Confidentiality

We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. The following people and entities will have access to the information you provide:

Rebecca Lane Eswine and Dr. DaShaunda Patterson
 GSU Institutional Review Board
 Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP)

We will use a study number rather than your name on study records. The information you provide will be stored under password protection on the student PI's computer. The interview and recordings will be stored and kept under password protection on the student PI's computer. The identifiable data will be stored for 5 years and then will be destroyed. De-identified data will be saved for potential future studies.

When we present or publish the results of this study, we will not use your name or other information that may identify you.

Contact Information

Contact Dr. DaShaunda Patterson and Rebecca Lane Eswine at 678-982-3892 and rlane9@student.gsu.edu and dspatterson@gsu.edu If you have questions about the study or your part in it

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study
 Contact the GSU Office of Human Research Protections at 404-413-3500 or irb@gsu.edu
 if you have questions about your rights as a research participant
 if you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research

Consent

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you are willing to volunteer for this research, please sign below.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

Principal Investigator or Researcher Obtaining Consent

Date

Appendix B

Interview One Protocol

Thank you for bringing two images with you today to help guide our interview. I will ask you to describe the images and ask follow-up questions to gather additional information.

1. Please tell me about the image that you brought that represents your approach to inclusion.
 - a. Who is in the image? Describe the context of the photo.
 - b. How does this image represent inclusion?
 - c. How do you define inclusion?
 - d. How do you approach inclusion in with your students?
 - e. What opportunities for inclusion (within the building/within the community) do your students have?

2. Please tell me about the image that you brought that represents high-quality instruction for your students.
 - a. Who is in the image? Describe the context of the photo.
 - b. How does this image represent meaningful instruction?
 - c. What resources go into you planning these meaningful instructions?
 - d. How do you typically approach planning instruction for your students? (reading, writing, math, other academic areas)
 - e. How do you define meaningful instruction for your students?
 - f. How do you qualify academic success for your students?
 - g. As you are planning for instruction, what thoughts are crossing your mind?

Is there anything else you would like to add? Thank you for your time. Can we schedule an observation time? After that observation, I will share my interim findings with you so that you can review the information and provide feedback.

Appendix C

Interview Two Protocol

Thank you for making the time to interview with me again. This interview will focus more on your students' experiences with inclusion in the school community. (If we meet in person), can you show me around your building and share stories about the experiences you have with your students in what you consider inclusive settings?

-How do your students gain access to these areas?

-What are your students doing in these spaces?

-What kind of collaboration between you and your colleagues takes place for this experience to happen?

Let's review the student work samples and documents that you decided to bring to the interview. Describe the learning environment when the student completed the work sample. Tell me about the other documents that you brought today.

Thank you again for your time. After I analyze this data, I will provide an interim text for you to review and provide feedback.

Appendix D

Observation Guide

Guiding questions: How does what I am observing in this space demonstrate high-quality instruction? How is what I am observing demonstrating inclusivity?

Sketch the observation setting.

How does the classroom look?

Where are the students sitting? (Physical arrangement of people in the room)

What instruction is taking place?

How are the teachers, paraprofessionals, and anyone else in the room interacting with the students?

How is technology utilized?

Do I see evidence of what the teachers discussed in their interview about inclusion and/or meaningful instruction?