TEACHERS’ ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

A thesis presented
by
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to
The School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

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June 2019
Abstract

This study aims to better understand teacher attitudes and perceptions of students with disabilities. Given the continued rise of inclusion and the fact that regular education teachers are likely to be the principal providers of instruction for students with disabilities, it is important to understand teachers’ attitudes and perceptions of these students. Understanding which teacher experiences add to positive attitudes and perceptions and maximizing these critical components of teacher education and work experience is critical to the future educational success of students with disabilities.

This qualitative narrative study of high school teachers was completed in order to better understand what experiences may contribute to teachers’ positive and/or negative perceptions of students with disabilities and possibly understand what teacher education and training programs can do to help develop and foster more positive attitudes and success. The teachers interviewed shared experiences they felt they were lacking, yet express positive attitudes toward students with disabilities and including these students in the teachers’ classrooms. Teacher education programs and professional development implementers may consider devoting attention to improving teaching practices and supports through such experiences.

Keywords: teachers, attitudes, perceptions, inclusion, special education, disability, critical theory, teacher education, professional development
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all those who aided me in completing my dissertation and Doctoral Degree in Educational Leadership. First, I want to thank you, Dr. Chris Unger, for guiding me through this process while understanding, sharing, and keeping alight my passion for education. Your soft and always thoughtful hand of guidance kept me calm and sane and allowed me to discover how to do this. I would also like to thank Dr. Ewell and Dr. Vogel, my doctoral thesis committee, for their suggestions and advice which allowed me to know what I didn’t know. I would like to thank the participants for their time, knowledge, ability to be introspective, and their devotion to all of our students. Additionally, a special thank you and remembrance to Dr Leslie Wirspa who coached me out of the basement. The world has lost a true advocate for communities.

I want to dedicate this doctoral thesis, also known as “The Paper,” to my wife Emilie and our children Nicolas, Massimiliano, and Tienette for always being supportive and sacrificing time with me through this long process. Also, I wish to thank our cat Boobydoo for keeping me company during my many times of seclusion while writing.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter I: Introduction</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problem of Practice</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Significance</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter II: Literature Review</th>
<th>15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of Special Education, Context, and Status as of 2017</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion and Attitudes in the Classroom and Beyond</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying Solutions: Teacher Preparation</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Literature Review</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter III: Research Design</th>
<th>30</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Inquiry</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site and Participants</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protection of Human Subjects</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Research Design</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter IV: Research Findings</th>
<th>41</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morris</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturno</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Themes from Across the Interviewees in Relationship to the Research Questions

Themes from Across the Interviews in Relationship to the Research Questions …..62

Summary of Findings ................................................................. 70

Chapter V: Discussion of the Findings ......................................... 71

Revisiting the Problem ................................................................. 71

Discussion of Major Findings ......................................................... 72

Discussion of Findings in Relationship to the Theoretical Framework .......... 76

Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature Review ......................... 78

Limitations of the Study ................................................................. 81

Significance of the Study ................................................................. 81

Implications and Recommendations .................................................. 83

Future Studies ............................................................................. 85

Personal Reflection ................................................................. 86

References ............................................................................. 88

Appendix A ............................................................................ 95
List of Tables.

Table 1 ............................................................................................................................
39
Chapter I: Introduction

Problem Statement

As students identified with disabilities become mainstreamed into regular education classrooms, general education teachers are more likely to be the principal providers of instruction for these students with special needs (Silva & Morgado, 2004; Swanson, 2010; Wagner, Cameto & Levine, 2005). Teachers’ perceptions of students – regular education pupils or those identified as special education students – are not always evident. Teachers commonly lack preparation to teach students with disabilities, which may in turn lead to a lack of acceptance of them in their classrooms. The absence of proper integration and acceptance may lead to an increased separation and ostracizing of students with disabilities in the classroom or in the school in general.

Since the enactment of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975 and subsequent reauthorizations, students with disabilities have been prescribed free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Wagner, et al, 2005). More and more of these students are being served in regular education settings, in what is informally called an "inclusion setting" (USDOE, 2011). Zigmond, Kloo, & Volonino, (2009) asserted that the preferred model of service delivery in most of the United States for students with disabilities is full inclusion (p. 196).

Including students with disabilities in general education classrooms has been found to have beneficial outcomes for both students with disabilities and their regular education peers, and this approach has broad support from various interest groups including: advocates, education professionals, parents, and researchers (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998; McLeskey, 2007; Scruggs &
Mastropieri, 1996; Wagner et al, 2005; Zigmond, 2003). Inclusion can vary by schools and districts, and services may or may not be provided in the classroom for students with disabilities, but what is consistent is that regular education teachers have fast become the chief providers of education to these students (Silva & Morgodo, 2004; Wagner et al, 2005; Swanson, 2010). The number of students with learning disabilities participating in general education classes has increased significantly— which is the typical setting for many of these individuals’ academic courses. Most secondary school students with learning disabilities participate in at least one general education class (Wagner et al, 2005).

Given that general education teachers are now more likely to be the principal providers of instruction for students with disabilities, it has become increasingly necessary to provide general education teachers instruction in learning strategies and remedial support for learning difficulties, which may pose problems to differentiating the delivery of instruction and managing classroom behavior; this may also affect teacher attitudes (Chmiliar, 2009; Swanson, 2008).

Statement of Significance

In 2015, a large Massachusetts school district presented plans to increase inclusion district wide. The district organized a task force to develop a plan, with many key local players participating in implementing inclusion throughout the district. Students with disabilities, at the time this study was conducted, if they were not receiving instruction in one of the few district “inclusion” schools, were generally being taught in what are called “substantially separate” classrooms. These classrooms are generally small with a limit of 12 students taught solely by a special education teacher. Unfortunately, these teachers often find themselves teaching out of their subject area or they have no other certifications beyond special education.
IDEA 2004 required that all students receive an education in LRE settings. Separating students with disabilities out of the mainstream, as in the case of the district, did not comply with this legal directive and also created segregated schooling. In an Editorial Projects in Education Research Center's report "Special Education in America," Swanson (2008) stated that "[M]ore than at any other time in the history of American education, youth with disabilities receive instruction in school settings similar to those serving the general student population, continuing the trend of mainstreaming" (p. 9). As mentioned in the previous section, including students with disabilities in general education classrooms is beneficial for all students, and this approach has broad support from various interest groups (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998; McLeskey, 2007; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Wagner et al, 2005; Zigmond, 2003).

The attitudes of regular education teachers toward having students with disabilities in their classrooms, and towards being tasked to provide them an appropriate education that meets their needs, is of concern to this researcher. Witnessing his district moving toward a more inclusive model across the district, the researcher considered it essential to understand the attitudes and perceptions of teachers working with students with disabilities, given their responsibility to service these students with much greater frequency and regularity. Nieto (1995) contended that the attitudes and practices of schools, communities, and society dramatically control the opportunities for success among various populations of students. A better understanding of teacher attitudes and perceptions of students with disabilities can contribute to the success of inclusion and can speak to the professional development and preparation teachers need to work with this populace.
In this context, the purpose of this study was to explore teachers’ perceptions of students with disabilities and how they perceive their level and quality of preparation to teach students from this population in their regular education classrooms. These perceptions were based on their personal and professional observations, their professional education, and their beliefs. The aim of this study was to better understand teacher attitudes toward students with disabilities, contribute to the literature, and offer insights that can contribute to the design of models for future teacher training.

**Research Questions**

The following primary research questions will guide this study:

1. How have teachers’ personal and professional experiences, education, and beliefs impacted their attitudes and perceptions of students with disabilities?
2. How have teachers’ experiences working with students with disabilities shaped the way they think about these students’ needs and the ways they approach meeting their needs?

**Theoretical Framework**

This study of teacher attitudes and perceptions is informed by critical theory. Critical theory in education can be defined through the terms resistance, emancipation, and power. Giroux and others (Giroux, 1994; Giroux & McLaren, 1994; Giroux & Pollock, 2010) have argued for the application of critical theory to inform a critical pedagogy that is practiced with the intent to reclaim public education.

Critical theory is appropriate for this particular study given that teachers, not just students, experience resistance, emancipation, and power in their professional lives. The
resistance may be derived from within themselves, or from an external factor such as a directive from the superintendent. Teachers may resist a current directive due to personal or professional ideas that lead them to fight against or for a particular inclusion policy or movement. They may be seeking to emancipate themselves from the directive or to discover their own freedom in interpreting or crafting the movement shaping this more inclusive environment. Critical theory and research attempt to understand the forces that inhibit people from “shaping the decisions that crucially affect their lives” (Yali, Enrique, & Trueba, 2002, p.91). Power dynamics can create inequality. Teachers may feel powerless regarding the inclusion movement and act out through retirement or other career moves. Critical theory considers that language is a way to construct the world, and the approach probes the construction of consciousness. This researcher’s goal is to better understand teachers’ constructed understandings of students with disabilities through a critical theory lens. The next section will further describe critical theory in terms of interaction, hidden curriculum, culture, and shared learning.

**Teacher-student interaction.** Critical theory asserts that societal problems are part of the interactive context between individual and society (McLaren 2009). Education interacts with the greater society and, through education, individuals interact with the educational society and the greater society. Interactions take place on all levels, but the most important to this study is that of the teacher and student. Teachers bring into the classroom many experiences, ideas, and biases. A teacher may hold a bias against a special education student in their class and think the student is less capable of the same work as their peers; additionally, the teacher may not want to adjust their teaching to accommodate the students. This leads to the idea of how knowledge is constructed, which lies in the hidden curriculum.
**Hidden curriculum.** The hidden curriculum deals with the way knowledge and behavior are constructed (McLaren, 2009). Different types of knowledge may hold many levels of legitimacy in different classrooms or schools, which may marginalize certain populations and cultures as a result. Paolo Freire (2000) sought to emancipate his students through his concepts of “conscientization” and dialogic action. Freire may have worked with Catholic peasants in Brazil, but today’s special education students in the United States are similarly marginalized, and his ideas are highly applicable to the problem posed here. McLaren (2009), meanwhile, explained that knowledge for emancipation facilitates a better understanding of “how social relationships are distorted and manipulated by relations of power and privilege,” and it attempts to overcome these (p. 73). McLaren (2009) argued that teachers need to understand the hidden curriculum of schools and supplant it with a curriculum which reflects the students in front of them rather than making the students forfeit their identities through the imposition of the hidden curriculum. In this way, teachers must develop a critical empathy to enable their students to find their own way, not just the way of the teacher or the hidden curriculum (Greene 2007).

**The misunderstood culture of students with disabilities.** Delpit (1988) asserted that the problem in education lies in "communicating across cultures and in addressing the more fundamental issue of power, of whose voice gets to be heard in determining what is best for poor children and children of color" (p. 296). Students with disabilities are a culture that is misunderstood, misrepresented, and miseducated, due to false perceptions and unwillingness for educators to change their methods and delivery of education. Collinson and Cook (2007) advocated that organizational learning must actively address problems or issues instead of
accepting the norm. The goal thus becomes to "discover erroneous assumptions" and "question existing ways of operation" (p. 15).

**Shared learning.** Social reproduction explores how schools perpetuate or reproduce the social relationships and attitudes needed to sustain the existing dominant economic class relations in the larger society (McLaren 2007). The problem of teacher attitudes and perceptions of special education students and the negative impact upon student outcomes fits directly within this critical theoretical framework.

Greene stated in her “In Search of a Critical Pedagogy” (2007) that teachers share in learning with their students and that they can empower unheard voices. She argued that all students, including special education students, have the ability to succeed and stop the perpetuation of social reproduction and disenfranchisement. Teachers that understand this and prevent their own and others’ misconceived perceptions that special education students have limited potential can empower all students toward emancipation.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Overview

Research on teachers' attitudes toward students with disabilities is not a new phenomenon. However, the majority of the literature explored in this literature review – which prioritizes elementary education given its prevalence in research – covers 2008 through 2017. As the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center reported, research on students with disabilities explores a wide range of age groups, making it difficult to focus on secondary education (Swanson, 2008). There is still a need for more research examining middle school students to both expand the research methods used and to fill a gap in the literature (Thomas, Curtis, & Shippen, 2011). This literature review examines research applicable to this study’s primary research questions:

1. How have teachers’ personal and professional experiences, education, and beliefs impacted their attitudes and perceptions of students with disabilities?
2. How have teachers’ experiences working with students with disabilities shaped the way they think about these students’ needs and the ways they approach meeting their needs?

Research included in this literature review was located through searches of online databases through the Northeastern University Library catalog (NUCat), using: EBSCO Integrated Search of Education and related databases, Academic OneFile (Gale), Academic Search Premier, ERIC, and Google Scholar. Searches were conducted using the terms: "teacher perceptions," "teacher attitudes," "faculty," "disabilities," "students with disabilities," and various combinations of these terms. The searches for peer reviewed, full-text articles only
produced 35 results using the terms "teacher perception" and "disability," and only 30 for "teacher attitude," ranging from 1993 to 2017, most of which were published in 2011 and 2017. The use of the term "faculty" produced mostly scholarly articles related to higher education, only a few of which are relevant to this researcher's analysis. Through this review, several topics of inquiry were explored including: (a) the status of special education, IDEA, and responses as of 2017; (b) the development of current concepts and policies, particularly the impetus towards inclusion; (c) the impact of inclusion of students with disabilities in the classroom and beyond; (d) approaches to preparing teachers to meet the needs of students with disabilities; and (e) professional development and capacity building, and their effect on educators’ perspectives on students with disabilities. These topics are elaborated on below, organized in the following sections: History of Special Education; Context, and Status as of 2017; Inclusion and Attitudes in the Classroom and Beyond; and Identifying Solutions: Teacher Preparation.

**History of Special Education, Context, and Status as of 2017**

Historical perspective is important in understanding the nature of inclusion policies and practices of students with disabilities. It “provides a basis for raising questions about definitions, policies and practices in terms of whose interests do they serve and what contributions…they make towards the development of a more just and equitable society” (Armstrong, Armstrong, & Barton, 2016, p. 4). An exploration of the evolution of vocabulary used to define people with disabilities helps provide an understanding of how disability has been perceived, particularly in relation to issues of oppression and exclusion. The trend over time has been to move from using the term integration to applying the term inclusion. This evolution is described below.
The idea of inclusion and the need to define it has garnered such a degree of importance that the United Nations addressed it at the World Conference on Special Education Needs Education in Salamanca, Spain in 1994. Advocacy in the United States, and the passing of PL42-142 with its emphasis on the least restrictive environment (LRE), had a significant impact on the actions of the United Nations and signatory countries regarding special education (Kasanji, 1999). The 92 signatories addressed inclusion specifically in the Salamanca Statement for Framework and Action in Special Needs Education. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) Salamanca Statement asserts that inclusive education:

- challenges all exclusionary policies and practices in education;
- is based on a growing international consensus of the right of all children to a common education in their locality regardless of their background, attainment or disability;
- aims to provide good-quality education for learners and a community-based education for all (UNESCO, 1994).

Prior to Salamanca, the nom de rigueur internationally to describe the incorporation of students with disabilities was integration, and it was linked to the history of segregation of disabled people in Western civilization.

Integration became both the new terminology used and the new reform practice aimed at countering segregation in the industrialized world. However, the term and practices were not applicable to the entire world – especially excluded were newly developing countries. For example, looking at the disability rights movement in Zimbabwe, segregation of disabled peoples was revealed to be “part of a socio-political based distributive human rights paradigm” (Armstrong, et al, 2016, p.19). There, institutionalization of disabled individuals was the norm,
and they were rendered powerless by and became completely dependent on the power structures, private and public alike. But as decolonization precipitated liberation struggles, the marginalization and institutionalization of the disabled in Zimbabwe gave rise to the disability rights movement. This rise in disability rights was replicated in other areas globally, bringing forth collective efforts to shift the focus of the rights struggle of the disabled from previous exclusions to more inclusionary models, particularly the one outlined in the Salamanca document.

The focus for Salamanca was education through inclusion. Inclusion is a broader term that was less centered on systemic reforms and that covered a broader scope of issues, particularly teaching and learning (Armstrong, et al, 2016). Seba and Ainscow (1996) described how, in defining inclusion, it became increasingly important to clarify distinctions between inclusion and integration. According to Armstrong et al. (2016):

At the heart of the idea of inclusive education lie serious issues concerning “human rights,” “equal opportunities” and “social justice.” How societies construct and respond to disabilities, gender, race and cultural differences is of fundamental importance. What discourses, what legislative framework, what policy-informed provisions and what resources are allocated to challenge the social practices underpinning exclusion need close and critical analysis. The extent to which rights, privileges and responsibilities of citizenship are extended to all members of a society is a topic of increasing national and international importance. (p. 1)
This development is essential to this study, given that it points out that the challenge that the idea of “social justice” or rights for the disabled presents to the status quo, and its power to impact perceptions and attitudes within societies, including teachers.

This dissertation focuses on attitudes and perspectives of teachers in a large urban district in the United States; therefore, it is imperative to look at the history of special education and how education of students with disabilities has evolved since the mid 20th Century. Attitudes toward disability, like many other things, began to change rapidly after World War II. Bolstered by the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education ruling, parents of young people with disabilities increasingly began to fight for more equitable services for their children. Through lobbying and legislation, they succeeded in advocating for the passage of laws mandating free and appropriate education for all students, eventually resulting in the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) in 1975. EAHCA, also known as Public Law (PL) 94-142, mandated that all public schools provide access for students with disabilities. In 1990, EAHCA was amended and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Weber (2012) discussed U.S. and international legal developments related to disability rights—and specifically to the inclusion of students with disabilities--by providing a history of inclusion in law, with insights from prominent sources like the U.S. Supreme Court and the United Nations. Weber (2012) reported that inclusion had again begun to face significant challenges in the United States and abroad and emphasized the prevalence of ambivalent attitudes toward inclusion. He suggested that, although the consensus supported inclusion as the means to achieve the integration of students with disabilities in the mainstream classroom, much
Inclusion and Attitudes in the Classroom and Beyond

**Teachers’ attitudes toward students with disabilities.** Teachers' attitudes toward students with disabilities are at the heart of this literature review. Studies of teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion have produced varied results. Some researchers have reported negative attitudes (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003; Avramidis & Norwich, 2000; Cornoldi, Terreni, Scruggs, & Mastropieri, 1998; Daane, Beirne-Smith, & Latham, 2000; D’Alonzo, Gordano, & Vanleeuwen, 1997; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Smith & Smith, 2000; Vidovich & Lombard, 1998) have emphasized positive attitudes toward inclusion. In general, researchers have asserted that the way teachers deal with students with disabilities in their class is of utmost importance (Eiserman, Shisler, & Healey, 1995; Zoniou-Sideri & Vlachou, 2006), and attitudes and perceptions can help shape the students’ perceptions of themselves and others as well (Lindsay, 2007). Positive attitudes towards students with disabilities, and willingness to allow differences in the classroom, positively and effectively influence, and “widely affect both the attitudes of their colleagues, of parents and children without disabilities, as well as the success of inclusion” (Koster, Nakken, Pijl, & Van Houten, 2009).

Understanding teachers' attitudes, how they are formed, and how they can be altered, can aid future research and affect changes in teacher preparation. An overview of Findings from Wave 2 of the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) reported various causes of achievement gaps, but it did not list school experience as one (NCSER, 2006). These studies and...
reports relied on some teacher-generated data through direct assessment and functional ratings, but research is severely lacking regarding teachers’ perceptions of student ability.

**Formation of teacher attitudes: Predetermination vs. learned.** While the relationship between teacher perceptions and attitudes and students with disabilities’ achievement is understudied, a number of studies do try to understand how teachers’ attitudes are formed. Kim (2011) looked at the influence teacher preparation programs have on teacher attitudes toward inclusion and found that pre-service teachers reported positive attitudes toward inclusion, collaboration, and adapting their teaching to respond positively to students with disabilities. In a study that examined teachers’ attitudes in inclusive settings, perceptions of their roles and responsibilities toward student learning, and how this relates to their own effectiveness, Jordan, Glenn, and McGhie-Richmond (2010) discovered that teacher beliefs are hard to change: they are related to beliefs on equity, differing greatly, and they are shaped by school environment. The authors suggested that “beliefs may need to be interpreted as socially contextualized by the views held in the school rather than as personal characteristics” (Jordan et al., 2010, p.264). This is key to not only understanding the origin of teacher attitudes but also those attitudes relate to contemporary and past social contexts.

McCray and McHatton (2011) studied the perceptions of pre-service general education teachers regarding inclusion of students with disabilities, how they change after a course in integrating students with disabilities, and whether there were differing outcomes between programs. They reported overall positive attitudes, but many scholars were found to be still undecided regarding whether or not students with disabilities should be included in the regular education setting. Forlin and Chambers (2011) similarly looked at pre-service teachers' attitudes
toward inclusion before and after the instructors took a course on inclusion practices. They found differences in attitude did not vary and found links between levels of confidence in teaching students with disabilities and teachers attitudes toward them. This is important because it implies that teachers' attitudes may not be changed by course work in special education and that attitudes are predetermined prior to entering the teaching field.

Bender, Vail, and Scott (1995), Kim (2011), and McCray and McHatton (2011) all reported that teachers do hold positive attitudes toward students with disabilities. The question then becomes: What makes these teachers have more positive attitudes than what a majority of the research suggests? To explore this issue, it is important to understand how teachers in different programs, special education or regular education, form attitudes. Thomas et al (2011) looked at the perceptions of pre-service and in-service human service professionals, including teachers, toward people with disabilities. It was found that special education teachers have more positive and accepting attitudes toward individuals with disabilities than counselors or regular education teachers.

**Negative and positive attitudes towards students with disabilities.** Bender et al (1995), McCray, and McHatton (2011), and Kim (2011) all found that teachers do hold positive attitudes toward students with disabilities, yet these positive reports seem to run contrary to much of the rest of the literature. In a study in a large northeastern university in the United States, Bruder and Magro-Wilson (2010) reported that, although most participants (students, both undergraduate and graduate, as well as faculty) surveyed expressed feelings of admiration for students with disabilities, many said they felt pity and even awkwardness around these individuals. Bruder and Magro-Wilson (2010) indicated that both students and faculty could
benefit from inclusion practices that promote deeper interactions with students with disabilities, which could, through direct experience, increase knowledge and understanding of disabilities. This also speaks to the formation of teachers’ attitudes through their college education curricula, which prepares them for the classroom. Jensen et al. (2004) also explored higher education, specifically teacher attitudes, toward students with disabilities, and reported that teachers held a mistrust of diagnosis and student motives, and exhibited as lack of clarity and skill in accommodating such students. Kellner and Freden (2006) sought to understand the experiences and meanings attributed to college students' previous identification as students with disabilities when they had been in secondary school. The participants reported stigmatization, lessened expectations, and overall social constrictions of what was deemed to be appropriate education for students with disabilities. This study provides an important view of teachers of students with disabilities from their own perspectives, and it aims to present important data to improve the education of students with disabilities. The studies outlined above, though they refer to higher education, transfer with relevance to understanding perceptions and attitudes of students and teachers in secondary education.

Semmel et al (1991) and Horne and Timmons (2009) reported that teachers said they believed the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular education classes can negatively affect the non-disabled students. Internationally, Nagata (2007) assessed the attitudinal barriers toward disabled persons in Jordan using the Scale of Attitudes toward Disabled People (SADP). The results revealed a generally negative attitude toward disabled people.

**Attitudes regarding the placement of students with disabilities.** A primary theme in the research on teacher perception and attitudes toward students with disabilities is the
appropriateness of their placement. Indeed, nearly 70% of students with disabilities have
teachers that consider their placement in regular education classes appropriate (NCSER, 2006).
There is no mention, however, of the other 30% of students not deemed appropriately placed by
their teachers. Thirty percent seems like a large enough portion of the special education
population to not overlook.

Semmel et al. (1991) reported nearly two decades ago that teachers were more in favor
of pullout than inclusion for students with disabilities and that the educators believed inclusion
could negatively affect regular education student outcomes. Another relatively older study
included in this review, Bender et al. (1995), investigated the instructional strategies used and
teacher attitudes in mainstream classes. The findings stated that teachers generally agreed with
mainstreaming, yet there was a substantial number who did not; moreover, teacher efficacy
appeared to be tied to attitudes. Horne and Timmons (2009) investigated teachers' perceptions
regarding placement of students with disabilities in their classrooms and the impact on their
workload. They also reported positive attitudes toward students with disabilities; however, they
did express concern regarding the effect on non-disabled students and cited a lack of training as
one source of this problem.

**Identifying Solutions: Teacher Preparation**

Teaching is a profession that requires an effort by instructors to constantly build on
knowledge and experience, to develop and test ideas, and to share successes and failures.

Hargreaves and Fullan (2015) stated in their book *Professional capital: Transforming teaching
in every school*:
What is needed is a profession that constantly builds its knowledge base and corresponding expertise, where practices and their impact are transparently tested, developed, circulated, and adapted. There needs to be a continuous amalgamation of precision and innovation, as well as inquiry, improvisation, and experimentation. The sorting process involves one’s own and other teacher’s practice informed by the research base and interpreted together. And there needs to be a mix of committing to best practice (existing practices that already have a good degree of widely agreed effectiveness) and having the freedom, space, and resources to create next practice (innovative approaches that often begin with teachers themselves and that will sometimes turn out to be the best practices of the future) (p. 50).

Thus, it is essential to examine the relationship between “best practice,” “next practice,” “past practice,” and teacher attitudes towards students with disabilities – all relationships this study aimed to explore precisely to inform future practices and training.

Teachers’ attitudes about inclusion of students with disabilities are determined by several factors (Silva & Morgado, 2004). Educational preparation is seen as a powerful predictor of attitudes of teachers toward students with disabilities, yet most teachers receive little training in teaching this population Rust and Sinelnikov (2010). Bouck (2005) explored pre-service special education training and the level of satisfaction special education teachers have with their programs. He reported that, although there were varied responses to program satisfaction, there may be a connection between experience working with students with disabilities in teacher preparation programs and teachers' sense of effectiveness in teaching students with disabilities.
Similarly, Semmel et al. (1991) assessed public school regular education teachers' attitudes, opinions, and perceptions relative to the Regular Education Initiative (REI). They reported that teachers, even though they stated they believed students have the right to inclusive education, did not perceive themselves as effective in delivering instruction to students with disabilities; therefore, most preferred having students with disabilities pulled out of classrooms for specialized instruction. Both Bouck (2005) and Kim (2011) suggested that this resistance might be addressed if teachers had more hands-on, field experience working with students with disabilities in teacher education programs.

In a study in the United Arab Emirates, Alghazo (2005) examined special education teachers' perceptions of effective instructional practices for students with disabilities. In that study, teachers in general did not report perceiving themselves as effective in teaching students with disabilities, yet those with less experience reported more positively than those with more experience. This study is useful because it explores special education teachers' self-efficacy in teaching students with disabilities, and one could infer that regular education teachers may feel even less effective in teaching students with disabilities.

From the studies cited above, it is possible to infer that teachers need constant and consistent preparation and support to serve students with disabilities, particularly once they become in-service teachers. Darling-Hammond & Richardson (2009) and other professional development scholars have concurred in asserting that continued development and support is needed for all teachers; however, this need is even more acute in low-income schools that serve these students at high levels and with lesser-qualified teachers (Meier & Wood, 2004). Silva and Morgado (2004) sought to understand teachers' beliefs about what contributes to the success of
students with disabilities. Teachers, they found, said they believed that factors beyond the classroom (curriculum design, instructional practices, school, and home climate) were crucial to the positive academic performance of students with disabilities. This might imply that the teachers do not believe they have much control over the success of this student population. Nonetheless, Bruggink, Goei, and Koot (2014), studying primary school teachers in the Netherlands, found that teachers indeed said they felt they possessed reasonable ability to meet students’ needs; however, working conditions, self-efficacy, and student characteristics also played vital and complex roles in their capacity to fully respond to this population.

According to Swanson (2008), the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center has reported a lack of information and empirical studies regarding the types or quality of services received by special education students. Rust and Sinelnikov (2010) recommended that pre-service teachers receive hands-on experience and instruction on teaching students with disabilities. However, results studying teachers’ perceptions of preparation have also indicated that educators generally observe that it is essential to receive additional training, support from special education personnel and administrators, teacher communication and collaboration, and access to related services to meet the needs of their students with disabilities in the general education setting (Finegan, 2004).

Logan (2011) examined teachers' beliefs regarding the components of differentiated instruction that were important to serving students with disabilities effectively, revealing that teachers received scant differentiated instruction in their preparation programs to work with this population. Brownell, Ross, Colón, and McCallum (2005), in a literature review, described important characteristics of special education teacher training programs. These characteristics
included: extensive field experiences, collaborative processes, and ongoing program evaluation. They found, however, that program philosophies and practices vary widely. They echoed other scholars by emphasizing the need for teachers to consistently have increased contact with students with disabilities to limit the unknown; they also stressed the importance of ongoing training for faculty.

**Summary**

This literature review provided an overview of scholarly research addressing teachers' perceptions of students with disabilities; however, a gap remains in the literature of studies that examine the perceptions teachers have of youth with disabilities in secondary school. The National Center for Special Education Research sponsored two longitudinal studies, 15 years apart: The National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) in 1985 and The National Longitudinal Transition Study - 2 (NLTS2) in 2000. Much of what is known nationally about secondary aged students receiving special education services comes almost exclusively from these two studies. Various reports on the studies have been published since the release of NLTS2 in 2000 that range from *Perceptions and Expectations of Youth with Disabilities* to *Substance Use among Young Adults with Disabilities*. This reveals that a deeper and more recent examination of teachers’ perceptions at this level of education is needed.

The Editorial Projects in Education Research Center's 2008 study called for further qualitative research to "continually improve our understanding of the numerous factors that, independently or in combination, contribute to a disability diagnosis" (Swanson, 2008, p.13). The center also reported that their efforts have been sorely lacking in understanding the "process through which special education services are delivered and the effectiveness of those services."
(EPERC, 2008, p.5). The present study heeds that call for further research by examining the attitudes and preparedness of secondary teachers toward students with disabilities. As Swanson (2008) stated:

Efforts to accurately identify and diagnose students with disabilities, to ensure that appropriate services are planned and delivered, to evaluate the quality of services, and to develop and disseminate effective interventions can progress only so far until a concerted and broad-based effort is made to truly open the proverbial black box and examine the actual process and practice of special education. (p.5)

It is when teachers talk about their perceptions to colleagues seeking information on students that perceptions come to light. This researcher’s own evidence from experience indicated that some educators have negative perceptions of disabled students and of the educators’ own abilities to serve those students. It must also be pointed out that this experiential evidence is not limited to regular education teachers, but it also includes special education teachers, guidance staff, and administrative staff, all of whom are educators. This study aimed to ground this experiential evidence in methodologically rigorous research to contribute to making the literature more robust in this area.
Chapter III: Research Design

The purpose of this study is to explore secondary teachers’ attitudes and perceptions of students with disabilities as shaped by their personal and professional experiences and education. A qualitative approach is well suited for this study given that its focus is on exploring teachers’ perspectives of their experiences with students with disabilities and identifying and analyzing those experiences that have shaped those perspectives. Qualitative research has become an important source of knowledge in social research. Experiences are personal and social (Clandinin & Connely, 2000) and are essential to understanding the world and its complex phenomena. Qualitative research gives credence to individuals’ narratives, remembrances, reflections, perspectives, and beliefs. Qualitative research seeks to understand and answer questions that place social experience as a key developer of human perspective, and it therefore is compatible with the goal of this research study exploring teachers’ perspectives of students with disabilities.

Qualitative research looks at real-world phenomena and how people interpret and create meaning from their experiences in the world (Merriam, 2009). McMillan and Schumacher (2010) wrote that qualitative researchers seek to “reconstruct reality from the standpoint of participant perspectives, as the participants they are studying see it” (p. 322). The qualitative researcher is the instrument of data collection, interpretation, and analysis of participants’ experiences and attempts to find themes or patterns among these.

Narrative Inquiry

Various methodologies are utilized by qualitative researchers in their exploration of people’s experiences. A narrative strategy of inquiry stands out as most appropriate for
conducting this study which strives to discover and capture the stories (i.e., personal experiences) that have shaped teachers’ perspectives towards students with disabilities. Teacher knowledge and understanding is personal, practical, and shaped by their experience in their everyday practice (Clandinin, 2013). Narrative inquiry is based on the “collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). The conceptual framework of narrative inquiry includes temporal, societal, and place. Narrative inquiry analyzes participants’ stories, or biographies, in terms or the importance of their experiences within the world in which they live and work (Merriam, 2009). In depth exploration of a small number of participants through collaborative relationships between the researcher and the participants, the reflexive role of the researcher and the researched, and the emphasis on stories, makes narrative inquiry ideal for this study.

Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding and inquiring into experience through story. Dewey’s (1938) theory of experience provides a basis for narrative inquiry. His two criteria of experience – continuity and interaction – provide further grounding for a study aimed at understanding teachers’ experiences and the development of their attitudes and perceptions (Clandindin, 2013). Dewey (1938) explained that what one has “earned in the way of knowledge and skill in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively with the situations which follow” (p. 44). Narrative inquiry is the study of experience as story and as a way of thinking about experience. As a methodology, according to Clandindin (2013), narrative inquiry: “entails a view of the phenomenon” (p. 240).
Research Questions

This qualitative study employed narrative inquiry to answer the following research questions, to unpack and understand the experiences that shape secondary teachers’ perceptions and attitudes:

1. How have teachers’ personal and professional experiences, education, and beliefs impacted their attitudes and perceptions of students with disabilities?
2. How have teachers’ experiences working with students with disabilities shaped the way they think about these students’ needs and the ways they approach meeting their needs?

These research questions were particularly suited for this problem of practice because it addressed the ways teachers’ attitudes are shaped through their experiences. Through in-depth interviews, teachers were asked to share their experiences with students with disabilities and to describe how those experiences impacted their attitudes and perceptions of this population. This included exploring how these attitudes and perceptions have also impacted their beliefs and their perspectives of their ability to effectively support these students in the classroom.

Methodology

This study used narrative inquiry to explore how secondary teachers’ attitudes and perceptions of students with disabilities have been shaped by their personal and professional experiences and education. Through interviews, teachers’ were asked to share their lived experiences and described how they consider these related to their perspectives of students with disabilities and their capacity to teach students with disabilities in the classroom; the study
brought to light the ways in which teachers’ attitudes and perceptions were shaped by their experiences and the roles they played.

**Site and Participants**

This study focused on the experiences of teachers employed by a large urban public school system and a rural technical school in the northeastern region of the United States. The sites were chosen due to the proximity of the researcher to the schools. The urban district served over 57,000 students, or a full 74% of the city’s school aged population, in 128 schools. Forty-one percent of the district’s students were Hispanic, 36% Black, 13% White, 8% Asian, and 1% Other/Multiracial. Three-fourths of the student population lived below the poverty line, and one in five students were classified under IDEA (2004) as having a disability. Twenty-one percent of the district’s teachers were Black, 62% White, 10% Hispanic, 6% Asian, and 1% Other. The rural technical school, which is its own district, has a population of only 500 and takes in students from across the large county area. Student demographics are in contrast to the urban district. White students make up over 92% of the population, followed by 3.6% Hispanic, 2.4% Multi-Race, and 1.6% Black. One quarter of the students live in poverty and one in every three students is classified as having a disability. The district has eighty teachers and only 2 are not white.

The urban district leaders and teachers alike have increasingly identified teachers’ attitudes and perceptions as a current and important topic as they move toward all students being serviced within an inclusion model throughout the district, before 2022. It was first thought that the participants of this study would all be regular education teachers; however, further thought and discussion made it clear that singling out one group of teachers may not allow for a broader
understanding of a diversity of viewpoints regarding how teachers’ personal and professional experience and education impact their perspectives, thus limiting the study’s findings only to general education teachers without differences existing between them and trained special education teachers. Thus, the researcher sought participants that had been teaching for a minimum of five years, regular and special education teachers alike.

**Recruitment**

Teachers were selected to obtain a broad representation of participants from different schools across the state, as well as from different departments or subjects. Teachers were recruited by reaching out via teacher union’s newsletter and directly through personal contacts. School sizes in districts can be categorized as small (100-400 students,) medium (400-1000 students,) and large (1000+ students). Teachers from each school size grouping were recruited, and the final selection aimed to contain at least one teacher from each group. Additionally, teachers from different subject matter departments were selected in an attempt to secure a diverse sample and reduce bias. While I reached out to many teachers across the Commonwealth, only four took the time out of their busy schedules to voluntarily meet with me and sit down to share their personal and professional experiences.

The criteria set out for participation indicated that the teachers must be what is described as secondary (high school) “regular education” classroom teachers, that is they weren’t currently serving in the role as a “special education” teacher, special education specialist, or other roles in public education. The initial expectation was that participants had experience with “co-teaching” but this was modified as there were varied understandings and many misunderstanding of what co-teaching is. Murkowski (2003) tells us that co-teaching requires two or more teachers to
“co-plan, co-instruct, and co-assess” (p. 10). Murkowski & Lochner (2017) further elaborate that “without all three of these components, educators are simply not co-teaching” (p. 13). Therefore, the criteria were adjusted to only stipulate that teachers have had experience with students with disabilities in their classrooms. With this change, teachers stories led to varied experiences with students with disabilities and work with their colleagues as well as experiences with people with disabilities outside of the classroom that would shape their perceptions.

Data Collection

Narrative inquiry was chosen as a methodology for this study because it appropriately served the purpose of gathering and reviewing teachers’ stories and thus the experiences that they believed shaped their attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs toward students with disabilities; it also examined the experiences they attributed to shaping those perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs. In keeping with the practices of narrative inquiry, data was collected through one-on-one, open-ended interviews. One-on-one interviews afforded the participants the opportunity for introspection that they needed to make sense of their personal experiences and to explain how they perceived these experiences to have contributed to their attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs toward students with disabilities. Time and location of interviews were dependent on participants’ location, availability, and desire for convenience, privacy and confidentiality.

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed (see Appendix A) which allowed each participant to share the multiple stories that they considered having shaped their beliefs about and perspectives of students with disabilities; the researcher also queried them regarding how their experiences have affected their own capacity to teach students with disabilities. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the commercial transcription
company Rev.com for the purpose of analysis. Emphasis was placed on the “told,” therefore, keeping participants stories and the sequence of action intact was important, and effort was made to fulfill these criteria (Riessman, 2008). Field texts were then supplemented by researcher notes taken during interviews and by reflective memos that helped document the conditions surrounding and the varied aspects of the responses. Unfortunately, one of the participant’s interviews was destroyed prior to transcription and had to be left out of the analysis.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed in accordance with the experience-centered approach outlined by Clandinin and Connnelly (2000), Riessman (2008), and Clandinin (2013) for narrative inquiry analysis of qualitative data. This approach relied less on the verification of facts and much more on identifying interviewees’ experiences as told in the form of stories. As Clandinin and Roseik (2007) stated:

Framed within this view of experience, the focus of narrative inquiry is not only on the individuals’ experience but also on the social, cultural, and institutional narratives [in] which individuals’ experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted. Narrative inquirers study the individual’s experience in the world, and experience that is stories both in the living and telling and that can be studied by listening, observing, living alongside another, and writing, and interpreting texts. (pp. 42-43)

This researcher was interested in how participants assembled and sequenced their stories, in the how and why events are told. Questions that guided this inquiry into language and intention were derived from Riessman (2008): “Why is the succession of events configured that way? What cultural resources does the story draw on, or take for granted? What storehouse of plots
does it call up? What does the story accomplish? Are there gaps and inconsistencies that might suggest preferred, alternative, or counter-narratives?” (p. 12).

**Coding.** The first level of data analysis entailed the assigning of meaning to segments of the data, in this case, transcribed texts of the interviews, including the participants’ sharing of stories and experiences. Using the work of Clandinin & Connelly (2000) as a guide, the first step in this process was to get a sense of the data in totality. While carefully reading through the interview transcripts for each case, the researcher constructed a summarized account of the different narratives. Next, all transcripts and reflections were initially coded based on these impressions. As the researcher read through data segments, he sought story lines that interconnected, identified apparent gaps, and recorded emerging tensions, all along mapping continuities (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This open coding began with the interview texts to determine distinct concepts and categories which formed the basic units of analysis. After the initial coding of each narrative was completed, codes were then revisited and identified as major, important, or minor. From these groupings, the researcher revised, combined, or eliminated various codes to begin indexing all code definitions. Once satisfied with the coding scheme, all similar codes were be grouped into larger categories, or themes. The text was then reread using these concepts and impressions to confirm they accurately represented the responses of the interviewees and to explore how they were related. The results were represented in a data table (Huberman, 2014).

**Thematic analysis.** The second level of data analysis involve the larger themes. Identifying common thematic elements across participants an established tradition in qualitative inquiry (Riessman, 2008). Tension is inherent in reducing participants’ narratives into
generalizable themes, yet similar patterns that echo across participants’ narratives can be identified (Clandinin, 2013).

**Trustworthiness and Validity**

**Reflexivity.** Because qualitative findings were processed through and constructed in researchers’ minds, credible reporting of these findings required considerable reflexivity. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) defined reflexivity as “rigorous self-scrutiny by the researcher throughout the entire process” (p. 332). The point is not to deny human subjectivity, but to take it into account while conducting research. Reflexivity reminds researchers to be attentive to the origins of their own perspective and voice as well as the perspectives and voices of those they interview, and of those to whom they report (Patton, 2002). Being reflexive, then, implies care, trust, and genuine dialogue between the inquirer, the participants, and the audience. As outlined in the section on data collection above, a number of measures, such as preliminary interviews, were taken to help engender trust between participants and the researcher. To further increase reflexivity, three self-questioning screens suggested by Patton (2002) were used and monitored in a field journal that the researcher kept during analysis and reporting of data. Theses included self-reflexivity, participant reflexivity, and audience reflexivity (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Triangulated Reflexive Inquiry*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-reflexivity</th>
<th>Participant reflexivity</th>
<th>Audience reflexivity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do I know?</td>
<td>How do those studied know what they know?</td>
<td>What perspectives do they bring to the findings I offer?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do I know what I know?</td>
<td>What shaped and has shaped their worldview?</td>
<td>How do they perceive me?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note. Taken from Patton (2002).

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Particular ethical considerations were taken into account during the research endeavor. While it is highly unlikely that this study caused any discomfort or injury to participants, Creswell (2013) described several ethical issues that researchers should be mindful of throughout the research process. Procedurally, the researcher sought approval from the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to conduct the research and comply with guidelines related to the protection of participants, including taking every measure possible to protect the identity and confidentiality of the participants involved in the study. In addition, qualitative researchers must be aware of the power they have during the research process, and of the imbalances and cultural separations that influence interactions during data collection. Creating a comfortable and unbiased environment for participants was essential to reducing these barriers. Another consideration was that participants (administration and teachers) in this study may feel vulnerable or ashamed because they have struggled and possibly failed to meet the needs of their students. It, therefore, became imperative to build trust and rapport between the researcher and the participant. In the end, the opportunity to openly discuss and reflect upon their struggles was a beneficial learning experience for some participants.

**Summary**

In summary, this study explored secondary teachers’ attitudes and perceptions of students with disabilities as shaped by their personal and professional experiences and education. Narrative inquiry was utilized to inquire into teachers’ experiences through stories. Standard
narrative inquiry processes were followed to collect and analyze data in a structured manner. Deductive references to critical theory, the theoretical framework guiding the study, was made only after the data had been analyzed. Given the active role of the researcher in the context defining the qualitative research approach and case study strategy of inquiry, precautions were taken to control bias and create trustworthiness. Overall, the strength of this narrative study resided in its ability to reveal the stories and discover teacher perspectives of students with disabilities.
Chapter IV: Research Findings

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore secondary teachers’ attitudes and perceptions of students with disabilities as shaped by their personal, professional and academic experiences. For example, the teachers interviewed completed varied teacher education programs, had differing experiences early in their teaching careers, and varied in the makeup of their family. Therefore, a qualitative approach was well suited for this study’s overarching research questions related to teachers’ experiences and education related to students with disabilities. In the hope of better understanding teachers attitudes and perceptions of students with disabilities and how their experiences have shaped these attitudes, the following research questions guided the design of this study and analysis data:

1. How have teachers’ personal and professional experiences, education, and beliefs impacted their attitudes and perceptions of students with disabilities?

2. How have teachers’ experiences working with students with disabilities shaped the way they think about these students’ needs and the ways they approach meeting their needs?

Context

The stories of four teachers who were currently teaching in public high schools in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts are presented in this chapter. The stories are shared in the order that they were shared with the researcher. All the teachers participating in the study were enthusiastic and willing to share their stories with me. The fact that they would remain anonymous likely contributed to their ability to be forthcoming in the sharing of the often difficult realities of their teaching experiences. All participants seemed to enjoy sharing their
stories and most mentioned how they hoped the process could inform their teaching.

Unfortunately one participants interview recording was destroyed and the researcher didn’t believe their notes would be sufficient in telling that teacher’s stories. Consequently, what follows are the stories of only three of the participants.

Ben

**Professional Experiences.** Ben was a science and engineering teacher at a regional technical/vocational school where he has taught for 8 years. Ben described his position as “classroom teacher” and he also served as the lead teacher for his school’s science department. Prior to teaching in this school, which could be classified as rural, Ben taught in an inner city magnet school for two years. Like many people who become teachers, Ben did not enter the profession straight out of college. Before Ben became a teacher he worked as a self-employed carpenter and general contractor, owning his own general contracting business. This real-world experience added to his understanding of the practical application of the subject area he taught in.

Ben described his current school as having a “heavy IEP load.” When prompted to explain this statement further he shared, “Currently at my school, for example, in our current ninth grade class, I think it's 70% of the students have IEPs. So it's a high proportion of students and then after that, I think only 10% or 15% of our students are not either on an IEP or a 504.” Ben further shared that many of the students attend his school because of the non-traditional nature of the school. “a lot of students come to our school because traditional school hasn't worked out for them and they're using, they're coming to our school because of the hands-on nature of our school and that works well for them.”
Ben believed that the nature of his subject lent to his ability to teach students with disabilities. “I teach science. So I can do a lot of hands-on things, which it doesn't matter where the kids are coming from as far as their ability, but they usually gravitate towards the hands-on stuff because they like that way to learn.” He further elaborated that the nature of his experience and subject area lead to more positive classroom experience for students with disabilities. “I can have the kids use equipment that they would use in a shop, vocational setting, in the classroom to build engineering devices and projects and it's a good hook for the kids who like to do stuff with their hands and use tools and even just learn something new.”

Ben relayed that the former teacher in his position, as Ben describes it, “was pretty old school and that's how he did it back in the 70s and he had been there for a long time and didn't go through a modern teaching program.” He further stated that the former teacher, “probably didn't go and do any real upkeep on best practices and that kind of thing.” and he also expressed that “the person who was immediately after him, I think had poor skills. That persons’ contract wasn’t renewed...Some people just are just not very good.”

Ben designed much of the curriculum for his and his department’s classes. He was proud to state, “I design all my curriculum so that I'm meeting the needs of most students with my curriculum as a whole and then I will do differentiated instruction as needed for stuff that's coming up for the kids I have. So I know that there are some kids, one or more kids who need some specific adaptations to what I'm doing, then I can do that.” Ben previously stated that his school had a large population of students with disabilities. In describing this further, and also elaborating on the idea of some teachers not being “very good” he said, “I think it's just there's some lag time between teachers and administrators catching up with how we serve that
population. Like the change in needs has been pretty quick and I think that we as a staff need to get ahead of that so we can provide the best support for the students who we have in the building because that's the demographic we're going to be having for a long time.”

Ben then described his school as the first place he had worked where “there's a huge gap between grade level and their ability level in different areas, particularly reading. Math is also low, like off by multiple grade levels.” He went on to explain his approach to the curriculum, “So designing curriculum and expecting kids to come in at grade level or close to it and then that not being the case for a large portion of students in the classroom really changes how you can go about approaching lessons.” When asked just how he approaches his lessons, Ben discussed how, due to changes in administration and the speed in which the school was transitioning, he had to create and recreate many lessons and even complete courses. Yet, he continuously thought of the needs of the students of the moment. “I'll try to run with my best idea of what had worked in the past and then sometimes I get caught up in, "Oh, okay, the kids aren't here when I thought they'd be," and I have to step backward.” He relayed the experience he had with one ninth grade engineering class where the students were not up to the expectations of the course in math and in fact were grade levels behind. Ben decided to go beyond the curriculum and take care of some remediation first. “So we just started busting out and making small groups with the kids who are in that location, preparing some reference handouts and trying to keep kids organized.” Ben described a large part of his teaching as “helping kids stay organized.” He utilized “binders with divided sections that as we work on stuff, it goes into certain sections so they have a reference bank of material that they can use.” Now that his school supplied
Chromebooks and Google accounts for all the students he had all the material available electronically and utilized an online platform to share materials and resources with his students.

**Education.** Ben believed his perceptions about students with disabilities hasn't really changed, at least since his high school experience. Ben’s believed his personal experience in school was much different than that of his students. He described the high school he attended as “structured” and his peers as “homogeneously grouped.” He didn't see students getting “special services” very often. “I knew who the kids were and the kids who had trouble with school or whatever, but I didn't have regular interaction with them.”

Throughout the interview, Ben often used the term “modern education.” When pressed to explain this modern education he stated, “I think enough teachers who are teaching now and maybe some of my teachers back then too have received modern education on how to be educators or have gotten refresher courses or something where that dynamic has shifted a bit.” Ben describes his path to teaching as “different” from most teachers because he “went into teaching older.” Ben earned his Master's Degree in Education through “one-year intensive master's” program at a state university. He described this as “a different” way than most teachers. Ben believed he learned the most about how to teach by doing it in the built-in student teaching for that whole year. “I was getting classroom experience while getting my master's degree instead of getting a master's degree, then doing a little bit of an internship thing and just getting a job. So everything happened at once.” Ben described his teacher education programs as, “It seamlessly was my education of how to be an educator versus, ‘Here's college stuff. Now go figure it out in the classroom’"
Ben couldn’t recall any specific coursework about how to work with students with disabilities. “I can't really recall anything specific when I was doing that year that would have been changing my perception.” Ben further described himself as “pretty inclusive as far as how I think about people and students anyway.” Ben explained that he hadn’t received much instruction throughout his career as to what to do with students with disabilities. It was something that he just kind of learned on his own, “and I figured it out as I went.”

Personal experiences. When asked if he had any personal experience with persons with disabilities, outside of work, Ben responded, “I'm trying to think because I think just subconsciously I don't think about people differently like that.” He was able to then recall four examples of his own personal experience.

Three of his experiences were with people with physical disabilities. Ben first talked of a co-worker that is paralyzed and wheelchair-bound whom he has worked with for a few years but didn’t immediately think of him as being disabled. Ben described him as, “a great guy” and “a real advocate for kids who need extra support.” He also shared his more recent and current experiences with a friend who “has a disease where the medication he has to take, the side effect can dissolve his bones.” Ben described this friend as someone who is “straightforward” about his disability and “doesn't let it impact his life.” He further stated, ”It's not something that you can hide because it's obvious you're missing digits and stuff, you know?”

He also shared an experience growing up about a girl in his elementary school class with “a physical disability where one of her arms, she couldn't lift up over this high.” Ben remembered peers “making fun of her because of that” and then shared this thought, “but if
somebody needed help getting something that's up high, like you just help them out. It's just that's the normal thing to do in my mind. I don't know.”

Another example Ben relayed was his own six-year-old son who Ben describes as having “attention issues.” He shared that his family has “only in the last few weeks started trying out some medication and it's awesome.” He further described his son as, “far ahead of a lot of his peers” and that his disability was going to “start holding him back with some interaction with other people and stuff and it's been so good, but you know ADHD is one thing and having something more severe.”

Experiences with students with disabilities. When asked to describe some examples of experience with students with disabilities, Ben told a story of his students with auditory disabilities that had been recently “coming” to his school and their reluctance to use the electronic microphone system provided. “There's a microphone system that I can wear and they all use the same system, but then kids are more self-conscious and I've yet to have any student who starts off in ninth grade or even transferring in who uses the system in school.” He relays that he had to consistently “check in” with these students to ensure they were able to understand and learn in the classroom. “I'm like, alright, can you hear me? Is class working out? Or can I rearrange where your seat is so that it works out better since you're choosing not to use it?” He went on to state, “They've actually been really good...And they seem to be developed enough adapted skills because of their age I think that they can function really well in school without the assisted technology.”

Ben talked of other assistive technologies he his students used in class, specifically text to speech software. He extolled the benefits of the software which worked in tandem with his
increasingly electronic classroom. When his students read “they have electronic ones they can run the reader through and hear it too. You can slow it down. You can repeat. So that's been another advantage for kids who are used to using that. Ben went on to explain that, “They can take time and go over things in a different format than just a physical print-out that they have to struggle reading.”

When pressed to describe what he thought about when he heard the term “student with disabilities” Ben indicated there is a wide variety. “So there are physical impairments that affect mobility or sensory issues or learning disabilities and I think the majority of the students I interact with have some learning disabilities.” Ben went on to describe a “separate, in-house program called the Pre-employment Program ” within his school for students with “more significant learning disabilities or physical disabilities.” Ben stated that he wouldn’t have these students in his classroom. The students with disabilities that Ben primarily worked with had what he described as, “some learning disabilities” for whom he had meetings where they developed plans and “what we’ve put into place specifically for those students.”

Ben, then relayed a story of a current student that “fell through the cracks.” Ben continuously stressed the need for communication and expressed frustration with the lack of it and inconsistency in documentation and critical information on students. Ben also expressed frustration with class size and the increasing variety of student needs. “So if I have 22 or 24 kids in a classroom, there's a limited distribution of where I can place all the different players in my class away from someone's who's going to distract them, not near something else that's going to make noise.” Ben was able to adapt to the needs and began allowing some students to wear
headphones when needed. "That's something I wouldn't have thought about before until it presented itself naturally where I am. I'm like, "Oh, okay."

Ben also told a story of a student “on the Autism Spectrum.” This student was described as very rigid and needing a high level of structure at all times. The student liked to sit at the same desk and computer every day, but one day when he arrived to class another student was already at the computer working. "Alright, they're already in the middle. They got the software running and stuff too. How about sitting at this computer right here? It's fine, and he couldn't do that and it wasn't purposeful defiance. He couldn't use another computer at that time because that's his disability.” Ben had to “come up with a solution so that everyone else could get their work done and this student could get his work done too.” After the class, Ben, ever the communicator, simply asked his students to keep that particular seat open for that particular student. He worried, "Oh, man. The kids are going to freak out about it,” but was surprised when they did not. He further explained,

“Like the kids, the other students, are really supportive at my school about other students with disabilities. They've been to school with the same kids who are maybe on the spectrum or they or other students have some sort of special ed, an extra thing that they get and they know that someone next to them doesn't have the same thing and then somebody may have something else. They're really used to that model and they don't feel ostracized because of it and I think it's significantly different than when I was in high school where I think kids didn't want anyone else to know that they were receiving special ed services for the most part and at our school, they’re like, ‘Oh, yeah. We have our special ed class together,’ and so many kids are in it. It's actually the majority versus
the minority. So it's not unusual and a lot of the kids have family members or friends who need something extra, like the student who needs to have the computer he's used to using’.

Ben told the researcher that he doesn’t “feel any different” having students with disabilities in his classes and tried to “meet the needs of my students anyway and these are the students who I have in front of me.” He further elaborated, “It's just normal. I don't see it as being different, but maybe it's just I'm used to it too. I'm not sure. I don't have any problems with meeting the needs of students who are getting something special.” He acknowledged that there can be frustrations being a teacher but it is important to never take anything personally. Ben attributed this to “some of the older perceptions of students with disabilities have faded.” He added, “They go away slowly. So I think conveniently there's enough turnover, slowly over time that staff understands now that students who have disabilities can do stuff like other students.” He stated that while, “you may have to support them differently or it might take longer or it might not be exactly the same outcome you can expect, but as long as you plan for what outcome is reasonable for that student and that's fine.”

While answering questions about the support personnel, described later in this chapter, Ben shared stories of students. He stated that, “some of our students come into us with learned helplessness because their paras in their previous places have done all their work for them.” Ben further relayed when he would first meet with the students they often said things like, "I don't know how to do anything, and I really wish I did, but this is the reason, and I wish it wasn't this way, but I don't know how to do anything on my own because I never did it on my own." He felt that often support personnel were actually doing a “disservice” to the students by “over
supporting” the students. Ben further expressed that he thought it is “important when you're helping kids with learning disabilities to put something, a structure into place that they can accomplish on their own.”

Ben stated that he believed that students who struggle have “never felt successful and so then they just assume that they are an unsuccessful student...like these kids, school was hard for them.” So Ben tried to create lessons and experiences where students could “feel successful which then I can build on that success and their attitude shifts a little bit.” Ben said, “hooking them with success I think is really important.” He shared an experience with one student who came from a “behavioral setting school” and struggled with “how to do school.” He described the student as having “a lot of stuff going on. He came into us like damaged goods and so he's never felt successful at school.” The student, when frustrated, would often leave the classroom and get into further troubles. Ben built a relationship with the student, provided him opportunities for success in the classroom and he left less frequently. Ben went on to explain that “building relationships and success with those students is way more important than making sure that they get their homework done...because if you can make a connection with the student, they'll be like, ‘Oh, people here care about me. I actually care about this place too.’”

**Resources.** Ben described learning how to better teach students with disabilities often through working with specialist teachers, specifically Special Education teachers, and relying on their experiences and expertise. “But I think the how-to support those kids, I learned a lot by working with other staff in the building because that's their special area of expertise.” He stated that “they just know they have some strategies that work well.” He would often check in with a specialist when he was with a student he was struggling with and ask, "Hey, I have this student."
They're struggling to stay organized. How do you deal with that?” He described these chances to share with, and learn from, other professionals as crucial to his learning and growth as a teacher and part of his understanding of what he calls his, “modern education.”

Ben felt that “having support personnel is good, especially if they are engaged with doing that and some people are better than others about their level of support and some things.”

As he continued, “We are a bit crunched on staff, so this year, I have a para with me for two periods in one week. I don't have any the other week. One of the periods, I can get by without having one there. Although there's a couple kids in that class who need, who have high needs, but the class is huge and the rest of the class is awesome. So if I needed to, I could spend as much time as I want with the kids who really do struggle more, but the period before that and I need, having somebody else in there would be awesome, but there's nobody available. So it's a limited resources issue. They're getting by. They're going to be fine. They're going to pass and stuff, but one person is hard with 24 kids. Having support personnel is good, especially if they are engaged with doing that and some people are better than others about their level of support and some things.”

Ben shared mixed feelings about his experience with co-teaching. He described one experience early in his career as “fine” and another more recent experience as “just didn’t work out well.” He expressed that his more recent co-teacher “was very good. He was definitely one of the best teachers in the building,” and felt that co-teachers “can take the initiative. They know what to do.” However, Ben did not agree with the model that the school was using. The co-taught class was filled with only “high needs” students and “we couldn't support the kids as well as if they had been heterogeneously grouped and spread out with just one teacher...The
teacher I was working with was totally good, but putting all the kids into one group with all the highest need kids and still having a big class size. Like if it was like 12 kids or 16 kids, like yeah, that would have worked.”

Morris

Professional experience. Morris was an English teacher in a large urban district in Massachusetts. He had the distinction of working in the very school he did his internship in and had taught there for over 20 years.

Morris taught literature, “because through my life experience, words have been such a powerful force. I believe that it is through language that we come to understand ourselves, things around us, and as I said, it soothes me indirectly.” His teaching career was profoundly influenced by his student teaching mentor. He believed that his mentor, “really taught me ways to battle against that negativity. Ways to believe in the work we do, and find hope where we need it most, and also just to always push.” The impact of this their relationship was evident and Morris referred to his mentor often, still more than 20 years later. He referred to a memory of his work where he described teaching Oedipus using Jerry Springer show. “I just remember the fun of... and the sense of chaos, too. I was going, “I know that we've got engagement here,” but also thinking, "This could go completely out of control at any moment."

Morris also feels that teaching requires one to be current and awareness of what is going to be relevant for students. He stated, “now that I'm older, and I'm more seeing and remembering the distance between me and my students in age, has gotten so vast. But they help keep us young.”
Morris described some of the most important early work he did with students with disabilities was to talk to “special educators I worked with.” He felt that, “some things had been missing for me, and I think for a lot of us.” The relationships he built with his colleagues, “was truly collaborative, it was an interesting learning, and it was sharing expertise in different areas.” Morris credited these relationships with shaping “my ability to think, and be a better teacher overall.” I think those partnerships with special education teachers, that involves learning. Those completely got me thinking deeply about instruction. I think I always thought about learning things, but I thought about it maybe from another angle.”

**Education.** Morris described himself as having “limited schooling on special education. I say this, sort of a mix of shame and pride, but I think my lack of awareness of how profound those were, made me kind of stubborn earlier in my career.”

He lacked education on teaching students with disabilities in his teacher training. “I had one course in grad school at the department. Just, I want to say it was the most poorly instructed course I had, was that course. Which made it uninteresting, and it was not very well done.”

**Personal experience.** Morris shared that he had some personal experience with children with disabilities that had a very profound effect on his life, “my nephew who is now 18 has very profound disabilities.” His exposure to his nephews learning allowed him to think more deeply about his students with disabilities. He felt that his experience was rare and more teachers should have more experiences with students with disabilities. He felt that teachers could become better educators with this experience. “There's such a mantra, maybe, kind of patent phrases about every student can achieve, every student can learn, you know. There's something wrong with you an as educator if you would suggest somebody can't.” Morris spoke about the idea of
telling someone “you can do anything you want in this world, which is a beautiful message. But 
you're not really educating at some point, if you don't talk about those obstacles and the limits.”
Referring back to his experience that said, “I guess it's a more personal thing, that says a lot.
How do you come to terms by yourself, with learning, telling him we care about him?
Sometimes it's hard not to.” He seemed to be still wrestling with this experience and its
implication on his life and teaching.

Experiences with students with disabilities. When asked to express what he thinks
about students with disabilities, Morris’ first thought was of “advocacy.” He stated that he had
“such a respect for people who find difficulty, who like get blocked in that, and still get through.
I value a lot of this job, and I have to say that, thinking back on the assistance, intellect, and
dedication of the students I have worked with, is something I admire so much.” Morris expressed
that he had “painful memories of students who have really struggled to advocate, or never could
advocate for themselves very well. But the majority, we've had amazing student advocates who
are so good at approaching a teacher.” These students would be able to articulate their needs to
him and say things like, “this is how I learn, this is what I need, or I found this to be true, and
help me with this.”

“I think, to memories of working with some of my first encounters with ... I don't know
if we want to use these terms, Asperger's or the spectrum, especially dealing with my career, and
navigating that route of, we've got all these classes ... 25, usually, sometimes closer to 30, who
are all trying to adjust to high school. And there's the student who has to sit in the same desk,
with the same chair. Knows it's not the same seat it was yesterday, who says, ‘Nope, hang on.’
Whatever it might be. That shade was up this way.” Morris learned and adapted, “like, it took a
while.” He also shared that, “students can also understand to the point that it's so important to have more inclusion, to realize that everybody actually learns differently.” Speaking further on inclusion he relayed “we get used to understanding why people, and I know why, but people need a certain thing. Is it really not that different than, it might be even Max over here who just needs attention every day, and has to crack jokes.” Expounding on this further Morris added, “if we're in an environment where everyone welcomed, everyone was part of a community, and there were needs that had to be met somehow, everybody benefits from that.” Morris ended this brief telling with this statement, “I am in awe of what all of our students are able to accomplish when they have the supports, when they have structures they can rely on, and adults they can rely on to be there for them.”

Morris spoke of some of the difficulties he encountered while working with students with disabilities, and one disability he labeled as “processing.” “It's complicated to me as an idea, and it's one of the ones that I think I am least well equipped to be an assistant in. I mean, I definitely have some strategies and accommodations I can offer, but for students who have difficulty processing, I always feel at a loss and out of hope.” He got deep into thinking about this. “I understand using visuals, I understand helping sometimes graphic organizing. I understand, those things as a product of knowledge. But I guess I feel like that is one of those moves that is sort of the holy grail for, I don't know how to unlock.” He stated that he “feels inadequate in that area.” He told a brief story about working with a particular student. “I bought it up with a student this year in writing. We'll have a great conversation, talk through, and the short-range assignment, and I look at it's like it never happened.” He explained further, “We could talk about it again, and it still sounds great, and there's something about the transfer.” Morris, always
interested in learning more to help his students, then stated, “So, that's one of those areas that I feel I want to investigate, I hope I will, and then support it.”

**Resources.** When discussing Inclusion Morris could not resist talking about what he called the, “two pieces of paper and a single teacher concept.” This related to the concept that one teacher could be certified in the subject are and special education and this teacher’s class could be called and “inclusion class.” Morris used an analogy to describe his feelings on this. “All that comes to mind is, I have a motorcycle license and a truck driver's license. That doesn't mean I can drive a truck and a motorcycle at the same time, and it's going to be effective.” He explained further, clearly at odds with the concept, “it may mean certain skills that cross both, but I just find it's such a money saving bullshit thing, that you have two certs. It's not inclusion because you have both certs!” He felt that this practice was commonplace, “at least in our district” but was an “injustice to everyone” and created a situation where he “will be less successful” which is ultimately “less important than the students being successful.” “I think it does such a disservice to all learners in a society... if a student does want to know what it's like to learn with some kind of civility, is in a classroom that's so poorly supported.”

Morris went on to share memories of what he called inclusion, but also stated, “I don't know that we ever nailed inclusion. I have great memories. I think those could have been better. My recollections, we always could have used more time to meet and plan together.” He shared his own idea of inclusion and what it should look like. “I think when you have the inclusion class, and you do have two educators, and you do have that combination of availability and expertise, there has to be genuine in students committing to planning, and debriefing together.” He continued to share that he felt he had the ability to teach students with disabilities. “I actually
think it's easiest on me, to teach, or it's not that big a deal in my experience. I mean, I can imagine a perfect storm where it would be crazy, but it's not that hard for me to teach a class that may have multiple students under different IEP's without support.” He added, “I would like to work in a school district where inclusion was sort of the default model. It's not perfect for everyone, it's not perfect all the time.”

Morris believed that another area of concern for him is student IEP meetings. “I feel like year in, and year out. The IEP meetings get worse and worse, because the bureaucracy takes over. The regulation, and worry about, what if you don't do this? Is the dominant force.” He felt they have lost their original intent of collaboration between student, families, and schools. “There's no point in having a meeting where we're not allowed to just actually talk to each other.” He elaborated that the expectation is “get this done quickly.” He suggested that the current model only allowed “each teacher to give a two minute report, and we are going to come up with a prescription that's going to solve everything. Bullshit.” Instead he felt they should, “talk it through. Say you don't know... let the student say too, "I don't know." It's not enough of a conversation.” He did, however, also feel that, “when bureaucracy fades away and there's those moments of connection, it's usually I think also important.”

Saturno

**Personal experience.** Saturno was an English Teacher in a large urban district in Massachusetts and had been teaching there for 5 years. He began his career in Georgia, teaching in the Teach for America program at a charter school for school years. Afterward he attended graduate school in Massachusetts to “learn how to teach.” Saturno taught literature, because “it is really good at helping students sort of think about what could be, I guess? Instead of what is”
and saw his job as “creating spaces in which meaning can be made.” Saturno thought deeply about his profession and believed that “ultimately, the act of teaching and the act of learning can be the center of one's life, and it isn't that you're ... it isn't that you're strictly in like a profession. It becomes this sustaining practice for yourself as well.”

Satruno described his current school as a small International Baccalaureate school that serves a diverse student body in the inner city. His students came from many different neighborhoods, income levels, and languages spoken at home. He described the special education population, “mostly consists of students with learning and/or emotional disabilities and depending on their IEPs.” He further elaborated, “those students take a number of classes separate from the general education population and a number of classes together with them (namely arts, language, writing).”

Saturno described himself as “terrible at lesson planning” which led to more discussion based classes. He relayed a lot of his teaching experience through these discussions about literature and writing with students. There was an air of uncertainty in Saturno’s talk about his teaching. Not a negativity really, but an inquisitiveness and desire to the best for his students and always striving for improvement of his practice. “I don't know, I'm always so envious of teachers who are very good at like, doing a class thing. And I'm like, I can talk about it the entire year. But I can't ... I don't know like ... I don't know.”

Education. Saturno stated he only had one class in graduate school that covered students with disabilities. “I feel like I'm still growing in regards to that. I feel like I have huge gaps. My grad school was okay.” Due to the need to be certified in special education to retain his current job, he had recently took a course that satisfied the requirements for certification. The
course was only four classes and “Some of those were great, some of them were really made badly.” He felt one class was exceptional and he stated, “I feel like I learned a lot from that.”

However, he also shared, “I wish that my process of getting certified would be more difficult.” He often worried that he didn't know enough to provide what some students needed. “I often feel when a student is still advocating by saying, ‘I need more time in that,’ and I'm like, Oh, absolutely. Then I'm like, I should be providing more support. And I'm like, what kind of support should I be providing?”

**Personal experience.** Saturno related that due to inclusion in his school, students were able to be in the same social circles due to being in inclusion, but his experience was different. “I think in many ways, it seems like that's ... like, that wasn't the case when I was a student.” Expanding on this he shared, “I think of student life, the students with IEP's, it seems like they were on the outskirts. Not always, but at a certain point, they were.”

“I wish I had more personal experiences about this, because I didn't grow up closely with people who have profound disabilities. I think it would shape my understanding in a really helpful way.”

**Experiences with students with disabilities.** When asked about his work with students with disabilities, Saturno replied, “I've had a lot, and then I have the research writing class, which is a mix of student groups. IEPs and not.” He also stated, very positively, “I feel like a lot of the time when I work with students who are in sort of ... have IEPs, have ... especially in classes, they are incredible advocates for themselves. He felt they are “better at knowing what they need than a lot of general ed students.” He relayed some of their advocacy in the following student statements, “Oh, okay, I need to sit here. This is how much extra time I need. This is ... I mean,
the most obvious one, I don't even know if she had an IEP, but she last year was legally blind. And was like, ‘I need print that is 32.5.’ Saturno then said something surprising about students with disabilities, “I wish every student had the level of metacognition these students have, it's awesome.”

Saturno was very introspective throughout the interview and added, “I think there's things that are that simple, and there's things that are more like, how do you make a learning environment more accessible for students?” He reported that when he has students with disabilities in his classroom and he tried “to be sensitive to what everybody's going to need. I definitely do more scaffolding just in general, now than I used to. When I have more student disabilities in the class, than I used to.” He added, “I mean, I like to think that I set up my classes with so many choices for students, that it makes it ... you can kind reach the material at your level.”

Resources. Saturno, in his retelling of his experience with students with disabilities spoke about the lack of resources he and his colleagues had to deal with. “I think everyone benefits from inclusion when there's support. The problem is that we're not doing it with support.” He went on to say, “it makes it very hard to work when everybody does that in every class, it kind of gets hard for the teacher.”

“I think inclusion is the best for everybody. I think ... my sense is that we're a pretty good school in our ability to normalize disability...I think that benefits all parties, both the special ed kids and the general ed kids, when there's support.”

Saturno spoke of another area he felt his school was lacking, co-planning time for teachers in inclusion classes. He considers himself a bad planner so even more so for him
co-planning would be helpful. “We need more planning time, but just informal planning time as well.”

Saturno believed one of the places he learned to help students with disabilities is at their IEP meetings. These are yearly meetings where student Individual Education Plans are developed. He said, “I always find it really useful going to IEP meetings. And it's incredibly hard figuring out how to go to more of them.” He did, however, understand that his expression of “I love going to IEP meetings,” comes from him trying to think of times he has been “in an IEP meeting that has been useful.” To counterpoint he added, “I feel like that's ... there's not a lot of time when you just get to talk one on one with the students. And that's what I think the IEP meetings are meant to do. You know, that school has that conversation with everybody.”

Saturno’s experience in his first teaching experience in a southern urban public school was different, “there were way fewer supports for students with disabilities” He reported there was a special education teacher but she, “was sort of in her office across the hall next door.” When asked if she was supposed to be with him in the classroom, he stated, “I'm sure. I mean, I didn't know what I was doing when I was there.”

Themes from Across the Interviewees in Relationship to the Research Questions

In addition to presenting the stories and experiences of the teachers above, the researcher completed a thematic analysis of the transcripts from the interviews to identify significant themes in relationship to the two research questions. These themes are presented and discussed below, drawing from the commentary and stories of the study participants.

Research Question 1: How have teachers’ personal and professional experiences, education, and beliefs impacted their attitudes and perceptions of students with
disabilities? A thematic analysis of the transcripts in relationship to research question one resulted in the identification of the following themes:

- Teachers lacked education and training in teaching students with disabilities. All participants indicated that their teacher education programs provided limited coursework that focused on teaching students with disabilities.

- Teachers lacked experience working with special education teachers. All participants mentioned their experiences working with special education teachers and the positive effects these have had on their work with students with disabilities. While they also shared negative experiences it was the positive that was expressed most often.

- Teachers lacked experience with disability in personal life. Ben and Morris cited personal experience earlier in life and with family members as having an impact on their perceptions of students with disabilities. Saturno mentioned that he felt he would have been more prepared if he has personal experience with people with disabilities.

**Teachers lack education and training in teaching students with disabilities.** The study’s participants all attended different teacher education programs in the state of Massachusetts, one at a public state university, one and at an elite private university, and the other at an Ivy League university. Each participant mentioned the lack of coursework focused on teaching students with disabilities in their teacher education programs.

Ben could not even recollect any coursework specifically focused on students, while the others mentioned they each only had one class. Additionally, Ben stated he never received further training during his career on teaching students with disabilities and said he ‘figured it out
as I went.”

Morris stated he had “limited schooling on special education.” He described the one course he had as “the most poorly instructed course I had.” He also attributed this to his own lack of awareness of students with disability and stubbornness early in his career.

Saturno, also only had one class in his teacher preparation course that dealt with students with disabilities. Because of the requirements of his district, he had to certified in special education to retain his job. He had mixed experiences in the district run courses he took for the certification. He felt that some “were great, some of them were really made badly,” and he did “learn a lot” from one course, however, he wished, “that my process of getting certified would be more difficult.” He felt he often wasn't sure what kind of support he should be offering students.

*Teachers lack experience working with special education teachers.* Ben had mixed experiences working with special education teachers. His experiences range from co-teaching situations to just reaching out to a teacher for advice. He rated his co-teaching experiences from “just didn’t work out” to “Very good...one of the best teachers in the school.” Ben stated that he felt he learned how to better teach students with disabilities because of his experience working with special education teachers. He told the researcher, “I learned a lot by working with other staff in the building because that's their special area of expertise.” Ben also shared that he would often meet with these specialist teachers because they had the resources and strategies that work. They would problem solve on individual students and whole classes and allow Ben to better meet the needs of his students and his curriculum. Additionally, Ben would gain insight into students affecting his attitude and perceptions of them. He gained more empathic and positive
views of his students with disabilities. He described these chances to share with, and learn from, other professionals as crucial to his learning and growth as a teacher. However, Ben felt that he was not able to interact with special education teachers enough, due to schedules, and the scheduling of personnel resources. He expressed a need for a more concerted effort on the part of administrators to schedule more co-teaching and collaboration with special education teachers.

Morris described his work with special educators as some of the most important early work he did with and for students with disabilities. His “important partnerships” with special educator allowed him to think more deeply about his instruction and filling in what he knew was missing for him. Morris credited these relationships with shaping, “my ability to think, and be a better teacher overall.” His collaboration with specific special education teachers allowed him to not only view the students more positively, but also his own ability to teach them. One particular teacher with whom he worked closely with early in his career allowed him to think differently, “I think I always thought about learning things, but I thought about it maybe from another angle.” He felt that this experience was critical in shaping his thinking and perceptions of students with disabilities. However, Morris rarely worked with special education teachers in class at the time of this study and had increasingly little time to collaborate with them in more recent years.

Saturno’s first reported experience with special education colleagues was fairly negative. He had little interaction with the teacher that he thought they maybe should have been in the classroom with him. However, Saturno was clear that he wasn’t in a position to judge or understand in his first teaching experience. He stated “I didn't know what I was doing when I was there.”

Saturno’s experiences with other special educators continued to be limited in his current
teaching role. Most of this work with special educators came in the form of IEP meetings and other meetings at school. He didn't have much, if any, planned collaboration with special education teachers, but understood that more collaborative time with special educators would increase his abilities and improve his work with students with disabilities.

**Teachers lack experience with disability in personal life.** Ben and Morris both shared their own personal experiences with family members with disabilities and the impact those have had on their perceptions of students with disabilities.

Ben shared broad ranging experience from classmates growing up, his close friends, and his own children. When asked to share his experiences, he at first stated he had to think about it at first because he doesn’t “think about people differently like that.” Most of Ben’s experiences included students and adults with physical disabilities, but also included some learning disabilities. He spoke about one of his current coworkers who was paralyzed and wheelchair bound that he didn't immediately think of as being disabled.

Ben’s early memories revolved around students with physical disabilities that were “made fun of” in school. He stated, metaphorically, “if somebody needs help getting something that's up high, like you just help them out. It's just that's the normal thing to do in my mind. I don't know.” This attitude toward helping others seems to have continued into his teaching career.

Morris expressed that his personal experiences with people with disabilities have impacted his life and teaching. He spoke of his nephew with profound disabilities and how this experience allowed him to think more deeply about disability. Still wrestling with this experience, he wondered about coming to terms with the limits of someone’s, his nephew,
ability. He asked, referring to his nephew’s obstacles and limits, “How do you come to terms by yourself, with learning, telling him we care about him?” Referring to the idea that anyone can achieve anything, he stated, “There's something wrong with you as an educator if you would suggest somebody can't.”

Morris also shared that he felt his experience was rare and that more teachers needed to have more experiences with children with disabilities. He felt teachers could become better educators with such experiences.

Saturno, the youngest of the group of interviewees, shared that he felt his experiences were different than his current students and that classmates of his that had disabilities were more on the “outskirts” and not included. He also shared he wished he, “had more personal experiences about this.” He felt more experiences with people with disabilities growing up, “would shape my understanding in a really helpful way.”

**Research Question 2: How have teachers’ experiences working with students with disabilities shaped the way they think about these students’ needs and the ways they approach meeting their needs?** The theme that emerged in relationship to research question 2 is:

- Teachers want inclusion but feel they lack the necessary resources. All of the participants brought up the idea of inclusion and shared their stories and thoughts on inclusion. Each participant discussed the subject of resources in relation to their experiences.

*Teachers want inclusion but feel they lack the necessary resources.* Ben never used the exact term “inclusion” but he did refer to the idea many times in his interview. He described
himself as “pretty inclusive as far as how I think about people and students.” Ben called his school a “nontraditional school” that has a large population of students with disabilities and often spoke of the students with varied disabilities in his classroom. He shared that “majority of the students I interact with have some learning disabilities.” And while there was a separate program for students with more profound disabilities, most students are taught in an inclusive classroom.

He stated he designed his curriculum to meet “the needs of most students with my curriculum as a whole and then I will do differentiated instruction as needed for stuff that's coming up for the kids I have.” He also spoke about the idea that his school was not doing its best for students with disabilities, “I think it's just there's some lag time between teachers and administrators catching up with how we serve that population.” He felt adaptations needed to be quick to “provide the best support for the students who we have in the building because that's the demographic we're going to be having for a long time.” While he had previous co-teaching experience it seemed as if his school was cutting back on support and paraprofessional supports were also being cut back, “We are a bit crunched on staff, so this year, I have a para with me for two periods in one week. I don't have any the other week.”

Morris’ experience with inclusion is summed up with his statement “I don't know that we ever nailed inclusion.” He went on to say, “I have great memories. I think those could have been better.” In regard to co-teaching model he experienced he had this to say, “My recollections, we always could have used more time to meet and plan together.” He was a proponent of inclusion and believed that “students can also understand to the point that it's so important to have more inclusion, to realize that everybody actually learns differently.” Morris,
speaking further on inclusion, relayed, “we get used to understanding why people, and I know why, but people need a certain thing.”

Morris shared his own idea of inclusion and what it should look like. “I think when you have the inclusion class, and you do have two educators, and you do have that combination of availability and expertise, there has to be genuine in students committing to planning, and debriefing together.” In thinking of the future of inclusion in his school district, he shared, “I would like to work in a school district where inclusion was sort of the default model.” But he understood that “It's not perfect for everyone, it's not perfect all the time.”

Saturno was clear that he liked the idea of inclusion with statements like, “I think inclusion is the best for everybody” He also shared that he felt inclusion supported all students socially. But he felt his experience was lacking, “I think everyone benefits from inclusion when there's support. The problem is that we're not doing it with support.” He added “I think ... my sense is that we're a pretty good school in our ability to normalize disability...I think that benefits all parties, both the special ed kids and the general ed kids,” but slipped in the caveat, “when there's support.” He felt his school was lacking in co-planning time for teachers and in speaking of inclusion he stated, “We need more planning time, but just informal planning time as well.”

Summary

Each teacher interviewed had unique differences to share about their experiences with students with disabilities. They each shared their stories of educational and professional experience that negatively impacted their work with students with disabilities, and in some cases this experience actuated a desire to gain additional knowledge and skills. Concurrently, significant common themes emerged, in that teachers interviewed shared some common
experiences that seemed to have impacted their perceptions of students with disabilities in positive ways, despite the difficulties experienced in their educational and professional experience.
Chapter V: Discussion of the Findings

Revisiting the Problem

There seemed to be increasing concerns in education regarding the teaching of students with disabilities, in the mainstream, by regular education teachers. These teachers often lacked the education, training, and necessary supports to provide the best possible education for students with disabilities. Teachers may not have had quality training in differentiating the delivery of instruction and managing classroom instruction. Additionally, these perceptions were based on their personal and professional observations, their professional education, and their beliefs. The above issues may have contributed to teachers' attitudes toward students with disabilities and lack of integration of these students in the classroom and schools. This brings back the research problem of practice in this research study was to explore teachers’ perceptions of students with disabilities and how they perceive their level and quality of preparation to teach students from this population in their regular education classrooms. If educators can learn what it is that shapes teachers’ attitudes and perceptions toward students with disabilities, this may help inform and prepare current and future teachers in instructing students with disabilities in their classrooms.

Three teachers volunteered to participate in this study. All were male and had been teaching for a range of 5 to 20 plus years. The volunteers were current teachers in Massachusetts public schools; two from an urban setting and the other from a rural setting. This rural school teacher had also served in an urban setting prior to his current setting. Each of the participants attended teacher education programs at three different Massachusetts colleges and had varying levels of experience and training in those programs and in their teaching careers.
In this qualitative narrative study, the stories of these three teachers and how they described their experiences with students with disabilities are captured. The research study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How have teachers’ personal and professional experiences, education, and beliefs impacted their attitudes and perceptions of students with disabilities?
2. How have teachers’ experiences working with students with disabilities shaped the way they think about these students’ needs and the ways they approach meeting their needs?

**Discussion of Major Findings**

The researcher closely reviewed and analyzed the stories of these three participants and coded them for common themes that were detailed in Chapter IV. There were four major themes that emerged more frequently that may be able to help better understand teachers’ attitudes and perceptions of students with disabilities. The four themes all focused on what the teachers in this study felt they were missing or impaired their ability to teach students with disabilities. The four themes were as follows: Teachers lack education and training in teaching students with disabilities, Teachers lack experience working with Special Education Teachers, Teachers lack experience with disability in their personal lives, and Teachers want inclusion but feel they lack the necessary resources. The findings from this study may help understand what forms teachers’ attitudes and perceptions and better prepare current and future educators for the instruction of students with disabilities in their classrooms.

**Teachers lack education and training in teaching students with disabilities.** A common theme identified across the participants was that these teachers, who all attended
different teacher education programs at Massachusetts colleges, lacked any real or meaningful education or training geared at helping them teach students with disabilities. The teachers expressed their dismay with this lack of preparation in the teacher education experience. Ben, could not even remember if he had a single class focused on the teaching of students with disabilities and was left to “figure it out” on his own. Saturno and Morris did remember the one and only course they took that dealt with the teaching of students with disabilities. Morris, however, felt it was one of the “most poorly instructed course” he experienced in his learning. These teachers lack of training in their teacher education programs affected their ability and desire to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Saturno, the newest of the teachers, worked in a district that requires all teachers hired since become certified in Special Education in an attempt to increase inclusive practices and dual certified teachers. Saturno participated in a 70-hour professional development seminar, organized by the district, to meet the requirements for licensure. He felt that he did learn from the seminars, but he wished that they and the process had been more rigorous. This further learning and requirements for certification had left him often confused as to what he should be doing to meet the needs of his students with disabilities. He felt he still needed more training and education.

Teachers lack experience working with Special Education teachers. All of the teachers shared that they had experience working with special education teachers that affected their own teaching. Additionally, they all expressed the need for greater collaboration with special education teachers. While each participant's experience was not reported as wholly positive, they did each express positive outcomes for their collaboration with special education
teachers. Ben stated he learned how to better teach students with disabilities because of his work with special education teachers. He told the researcher, “I learned a lot by working with other staff in the building because that's their special area of expertise.” Morris described his collaboration with special education teachers as some of the most important work he did with and for students with disabilities and allowed him to think more deeply about his instruction. Saturno’s classified most his experience as “limited” and “fairly negative” but he did have more recent positive experiences. however limited.

The participants all expressed that collaborative relationships with special education teachers was beneficial to their own teaching and their perceptions of students with disabilities. Saturno felt that more collaborative time would improve his ability to work with students with disabilities. Morris stated that his experience with special education teachers was critical in shaping his thinking and perceptions of students with disabilities. Ben also stated that his collaborations with special education teachers was crucial to his learning and growth as a teacher.

**Teachers lack experience with disability in personal life.** Something else that seemed to contribute to the participants’ attitudes and perception of students with disabilities was their own personal experiences with disability. Ben and Morris each had personal experience with disability and these experiences had a positive impact on their perceptions of students with disabilities. Ben shared his experiences with classmates growing up, his colleagues in his current school, a close friend, and his own son. Morris’ nephew has profound disabilities and he shared how this experience allowed him to think more deeply about disability. Morris also felt that teachers would become better educators if they had more experiences with children with
disabilities. Saturno reiterated this thought when he wished he had more experiences with
disability and felt these experiences “would shape my understanding in a really helpful way.”

**Teachers want inclusion but feel they lack the necessary resources.** Another common
theme identified across the participants was inclusion. Each participant discussed inclusion and
their own experiences and thoughts on the idea and the reality of the practice. Ben described his
current school as “pretty inclusive” and a place where most students are taught in inclusive
classrooms. Morris told the researcher that he liked the idea of inclusion and believed that
“students can also understand to the point that it's so important to have more inclusion, to realize
that everybody actually learns differently.” Saturno made this bold statement, “I think inclusion
is the best for everybody” and added that he felt inclusion supported students socially.

All the participants agree that inclusion is a best practice and beneficial for all students,
however, they each mentioned that there are issues with inclusion in their experiences, the most
prominent being the lack of resources. Morris told the researcher that “I don’t think we ever
nailed inclusion” and felt he needed more time to meet with his teaching partners. Saturno
reiterated this saying, “We need more planning time, but just informal planning time as well.”
Ben went into further detail on inclusion and co-teaching saying his school was cutting back on
support for inclusion, “We are a bit crunched on staff, so this year, I have a para with me for two
periods in one week. I don't have any the other week.” Saturno confirmed this issue with his
statement, “I think everyone benefits from inclusion when there's support. The problem is that
we're not doing it with support.” Yet, even with this lack of support the teachers maintain a
positive attitude toward the students with disabilities they serve.

**Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework**
The theory informing this research on teachers' attitudes and perceptions of students with disabilities is Critical Theory.

**Critical Theory.** Critical Theory in education can be defined through the terms resistance, emancipation, and power. Teachers experience resistance, emancipation, and power in their professional lives. Additionally, they experience resistance, emancipation, and power in their personal lives, which can inform further their professional lives. Giroux, along with other critical theorists and educators, calls for the application of critical theory in the attempt to reclaim public education (Giroux, 1994; Giroux & McLaren, 1994; Giroux & Pollock, 2010). The teachers in this study clearly attempt to reclaim public education for their students with disabilities. They are aware of the limitations, lack or resources, of their current schools and each work toward improving the students’ experiences and learning.

Critical theory asserts that societal problems are part of the interactive context between individual and society (McLaren 2009). Education interacts with the greater society and, through education, individuals interact with the educational society and the greater society. This research, utilizing Critical Theory, attempts to understand the forces that inhibit teachers from “shaping the decisions that crucially affect their lives” (Yali, Enrique, & Trueba, 2002, p.91) and better understand teachers’ constructed understandings of students with disabilities. Part of teachers’ constructed understanding comes from their own experiences and these teachers all seemed to have had their attitudes and perceptions formed by their life experiences with disability outside of the classroom. Additionally, the teachers in this study understood the limitations their teacher education programs have left them with through lack of education and training regarding students with disabilities.
Inside the classroom, teachers must understand the hidden curriculum of schools and supplant it with a curriculum which reflects the students in front of them (McLaren 2009). They develop a critical empathy and enable their students to find their own way, not just the way of the teacher or the hidden curriculum (Greene 2007). All the teachers in this study have developed this critical empathy and discuss ways they attempt to enable their students and develop a curriculum and that reflects the students they have. Ben was clear about this when telling the researcher that he tried to “meet the needs of my students anyway and these are the students who I have in front of me.”

The teachers in this study seemed to actively address problems or issues instead of accepting the norm (Collinson and Cook, 2007). In their discussions on inclusion and resources they attempted to "discover erroneous assumptions” and "question existing ways of operation" (p. 15). Morris’ statement “students can also understand to the point that it's so important to have more inclusion, to realize that everybody actually learns differently” showed that students and teachers are not accepting the norm and want more supported inclusion in their schools. Because, as he stated, “I don’t think we ever nailed inclusion.” Saturno also questioned existing ways of the practice of inclusion in his school. He believed inclusion is best for all, but “the problem is that we're not doing it with support.” Ben also thought that educators needed some “catching up with how we serve” students with disabilities.

Schools perpetuated or reproduced the social relationships and attitudes needed to sustain the existing dominant economic class relations in the larger society (McLaren, 2007) This idea of social reproduction is clear in the participants' stories in their own school and personal lives. The participants experiences, both positive and negative, shaped their understanding of students with
disabilities. Each participant, in a way, has attempted to stop the perpetuation of social
reproduction and disenfranchisement and empower all their students toward emancipation
(Greene, 2007)

**Discussion of Findings in Relationship to the Literature Review**

Much of the literature regarding teacher attitudes and perceptions connected directly to
the findings of this research study.

**A lack of education or training in teaching students with disabilities.** Rust and
Sinelnikov (2010) tell us that educational preparation is a powerful predictor of attitudes of
teachers toward students with disabilities, yet most teachers receive little training in teaching this
population. Similarly, each of the teachers in this study felt their teacher education program did
not provide them with adequate instruction and training in teaching students with disabilities.
Bouck (2005) reported that teachers’ sense of effectiveness in teaching students with disabilities
is connected to their experience in their teacher preparation programs. The teachers in this study
also believed they would be more effective in teaching students with disabilities if they had more
specific training in their teacher preparation programs.

Kim (2011) and McCray and McHatton (2011) found that teacher preparation programs
have positive impact on teacher attitudes perceptions toward inclusion, collaboration, and
adapting their teaching for students with disabilities. Forlin and Chambers (2011) found no
impact and suggested that teacher confidence in teaching students with disabilities is linked
toward attitudes toward them. The teachers in this study perceptions of students with disability
seemed to have been more connected with actual experience than any course work they took in
their teacher preparation programs. They related their attitudes to their personal and professional experiences with people with disabilities

**Experience working with special education teachers.** Working with special education colleagues has positively impacted the participants of this study. Koster, Nakken, Pijl, & Van Houten, (2009) reported that positive attitudes towards students with disabilities, and willingness to allow differences in the classroom, positively and effectively “affect both the attitudes of their colleagues,... as well as the success of inclusion.” Finegan (2004) listed support from special education personnel and administrators, teacher communication and collaboration, as essential pieces to meeting the needs of their students with disabilities. The participants of this study corroborated this and felt they needed more time to collaborate with special education teachers. Ben stated he “learned a lot by working with other staff in the building because that's their special area of expertise” and learned how to better serve students with disabilities because of this collaboration. Morris felt that his experience collaborating with special education staff was critical in shaping his thinking and perceptions of students with disabilities.

**Experience with disability in personal life.** Jordan et al. (2010) reported that teacher attitudes are hard to change and are related to contemporary and past social contexts. Two of the participants in this study spoke of experiences they had in their present and past personal lives that impacted their attitudes about disability. Ben and Morris each shared their experiences with family members with disability and the profound impact that had on their lives and teaching. Morris stated, “There's something wrong with you as an educator if you would suggest somebody can't” achieve anything, Saturno suggested that he wished he had more experience with disability in his own life as it “would shape my understanding in a really helpful way.”
Morris felt that teachers could become better educators if they had more experiences with children with disabilities.

**Inclusion and lack of resources.** Semmel et al (1991) and Horne and Timmons (2009) reported that teachers said they believed the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular education classes can negatively affect the non-disabled students. The participants of this study, as Semmel et al (1991) also reported, belief that students with disabilities have the right to inclusive education. Both students and faculty could benefit from inclusion practices that promote deeper interactions with students with disabilities (Magro-Wilson 2010). Many of the studies in this study’s literature review emphasized positive teacher attitudes toward students with disabilities and the participants here corroborated (Avramidis & Norwich, 2000; Cornoldi, Terreni, Scruggs, & Mastropieri, M. A. (1998); Daane, Beirne-Smith, & Latham, 2000; D'Alonzo, Gordano, & Vanleeuwen, 1997; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Smith & Smith, 2000; Vidovich & Lombard, 1998).

Darling-Hammond & Richardson (2009) asserts that continued development and support is needed for all teachers. Brownell, Ross, Colón, and McCallum (2005) emphasized the need for teachers to consistently have increased contact with students with disabilities to limit the unknown; they also stressed the importance of ongoing training for faculty. All of the teachers in this study felt they did not have quality, ongoing training and support from their schools and districts to help them teach students with disabilities.

**Limitations of the Study**

Given the small scope of this study, there were limitations that were evident from the sampling. First, while this study did include participants from urban and rural districts, it was
completed in a single state. Massachusetts is consistently the top-rated state for public education and working conditions, and teacher preparation programs are known to vary across states. The results of this study may not be applicable across all districts and states.

Additionally, the small sample of participants in this study posed limitations as well. Four teachers were interviewed, but due to the loss of one interview recording, only three teachers’ stories made it to the analysis stage. Not only was it limited to three participants, which allowed for meaningful sharing of their stories, all participants were males, creating no sampling of females. This was not by design but based upon the fact that they were the only ones to volunteer to participate. Given the small number of participants, as well as the gender implications, this would be a limitation to the results as well.

**Significance of the Study**

This narrative research study is significant to educators, administrators, and teacher education programs as they seek to design teacher education and professional development for regular education teachers. Regular education teachers need training and support in regard to students with disabilities because “youth with disabilities receive instruction in school settings similar to those serving the general student population.” (Swanson 2008, p. 9). This researcher saw the importance of understanding the attitudes and perceptions of teachers working with students with disabilities, given their responsibility to service these students with much greater frequency and regularity.

Research supports the importance of teachers’ attitudes and perceptions on the success of students with disabilities. Nieto (1995) reported that attitudes and practices of schools, communities, and society can control the opportunities for success among various populations of
students. Teachers’ perceptions of students with disabilities and how they perceive their level and quality of preparation to teach students from this population in their regular education classrooms are based on their personal and professional experiences with students and others with disability How teachers see students with disabilities in their class is of utmost importance (Eiserman, Shisler, & Healey, 1995; Zoniou-Sideri & Vlachou, 2006). Positive attitudes towards students with disabilities, and willingness to allow differences in the classroom, positively and effectively influence student success (Koster, Nakken, Pijl, & Van Houten, 2009). Rust and Sinelnikov (2010) state that educational preparation is a powerful predictor of attitudes of teachers toward students with disabilities, yet most teachers receive little training in teaching this population. Brownell, Ross, Colón, and McCallum (2005), described important characteristics of special education teacher training programs. These characteristics included: extensive field experiences, collaborative processes, and ongoing program evaluation. They emphasized the need for teachers to consistently have increased contact with students with disabilities to limit the unknown; they also stressed the importance of ongoing training for faculty. Therefore, if teachers are to be better prepared to successfully teach students with disability they should have positive attitudes toward them. These positive attitudes can be developed if teachers as better prepared with authentic experiences and receive ongoing development, support, and time for collaboration with their special education peers.

**Implications and Recommendations**

From my experience working and teaching in a large urban district and a small rural district, as well as from the findings of this study, I have developed some recommendations that would benefit my own public school system as well as others.
Expand special education experiences in teacher preparation programs. Teacher preparation programs vary but few regular education programs offer thorough training and experience in teaching students with disabilities. These programs need to increase coursework requirements in special education for all teacher candidates and provide them with more authentic experiences with students with disabilities. One class is not enough to provide teachers with the tools and experience they will need to successfully teach all of their future students. Learning to teach specific content is important, yet is not as important as learning to teach students. Teachers can be experts at content, but if they don’t learn how to adapt curriculum and their teaching to meet the needs of many different students, they will not be successful.

Authentic professional development. School administration must provide the necessary supports and training for teachers, so that they understand the significance of their roles as educators of students with disabilities. There is a financial impact on a school budget in order to provide these supports and training. Schools should invest in professional development that meets the needs of their staff to build more positive attitudes and effectively teach all students. School and district administrators need to identify effective training to help educators meet the needs of students with disabilities and set expectations that this must be embedded into the daily instruction of all students.

Teachers of special education often call their methods of teaching as best practice for all, not just students with disabilities. Hargreaves and Fullan (2015) tell us there needs to be a mix of committing to best practice and having the freedom, space, and resources to create best practice. Authentic, teacher driven professional development can lead to the development of the best practice of fully serving students with disabilities in the regular education classroom.
Create more opportunity for collaboration with special education staff. It is important for regular education teachers to collaborate with their special education peers. Teachers, when given the time to collaborate, share not only practices, but also critical information that allows them to understand their students more thoroughly which can lead to greater educational success. There are time and budget implications can be considered, but schools must plan proactively to support teachers in supporting students with disabilities. Creating more co-teaching inclusion classes where two teachers are in the classroom and share and collaborate in all aspects of the classroom instruction is ideal. In lieu of this co-teaching scenario, opportunity for teachers to meet and discuss students and teacher and how to best meet the needs of all students is a must. One way to allow for teachers to collaborate is to create co-planning time for teaching teams to discuss specific students’ needs, curriculum and instruction modifications, data collection and analysis. This will require innovative scheduling and commitment to the time for collaboration, but the benefit to teachers and students is worth the effort.

Implications. The teachers in this study were similar in that they all expressed positive attitudes and perceptions of students with disabilities, understood the importance of experience with disability in their personal lives in developing these attitudes, felt they had limited education in their teacher preparation programs, shared positive experiences working with special education staff, and lacked resources in their schools to carry out inclusion successfully. There must be more teachers who have similar experiences, attitudes, and perceptions. How many teachers share these experiences but don’t share the same positive attitudes toward students with disability? How can schools identify these teachers and develop more positive
attitudes toward students with disability among them? Teacher preparation programs, schools, and districts must do more to identify teachers’ attitudes and implement programs that increase the ability to develop more positive attitudes and perceptions of students with disabilities, thereby increasing teacher self-efficacy and positive student outcomes. Understanding what has fostered these positive attitudes and perceptions and applying similar approaches to other pre and inservice teachers may improve outcomes for all.

**Future Studies**

While this study revealed some helpful information related to teacher attitudes and perceptions of students with disabilities, there are future studies related to this topic that may enhance the understanding of what experiences help formulate these attitudes and perceptions.

**Larger sample studies.** The small sample size of his study, as previously mentioned, begs the desire to commit to a larger study. In a larger study it may be beneficial to create different groupings, including: pre-service, in-service, post-service teachers, years of experience, gender, and content areas. Hearing form a broader range of participants across different teacher groups may provide meaningful data that could enhance understanding of how teacher attitudes and perceptions of students with disabilities are formed, and how to help develop more positive attitudes and outcomes for students and teachers alike.

**Personal Reflection**

I first conceived of this study when sitting in the teachers' room at school. In the teachers’ room, and other semi-private places we would interact, I would often hear comments about students with disabilities that were not always positive. As a special education teacher, I would also field a lot of questions about difficult students. If a student was difficult I would often be
asked, “are they your student?” meaning the student had an IEP. There was a language yours
and mine and I wanted to see what created that division in some teachers minds. I knew that they
did not really believe any students were bad, but in the heat of the compounded difficulties of the
job, even teachers would say things they didn't truly mean. I know I have been guilty of that
many times. My hope was that any negative attitudes that played out could be contributed to
teachers’ experiences. Additionally I wanted to understand what contributed to teachers’ positive
attitudes toward students with disabilities.

The narrative research process enabled me and the participants, multiple points for
reflections. The participants mentioned that their reflection on their practice and lived
experiences thought the interview process influenced their current thinking about their teaching.
This reflective process can be a powerful tool in teacher professional practice and is one that
should be utilized and listened to by the teachers of teachers as well. I also believe that this
research shows that we teachers need more opportunities to share and reflect outside of the
teachers’ room. I hope that this study can contribute to a movement toward more authentic
preservice and inservice experiences for teachers. I plan to get working on that with my
colleagues right away.
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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research. Before we begin the interview, please review the consent form and sign it if you agree to participate. The consent form provides a short overview of the study and the interview process. The consent form outlines what I will do to protect confidentiality. Please review the consent form carefully to make sure you are comfortable with everything detailed on the form.

Since this study is meant to learn about your perceptions, please provide honest responses based on your experiences. Since I will be recording the interview, please do your best to speak clearly.

We will begin the interview in a few minutes. This process will take between 50 and 75 minutes. I will ask that you share your experiences while working at this school. I encourage you to speak openly about the questions. There is no time limit for specific questions, so it is fine to go into detail with your responses.

The first few interview questions will be demographic questions, and then we will proceed to in-depth questions.

Do you have any questions before we begin the interview?

Descriptive Information
- Obviously, you are a teacher, but how would you describe your responsibility and role?
- How long have you been teaching at your current school?
- Where were you before coming here and what did you do?

I want to take some time to hear your stories of your experiences with students with disabilities. Let’s start with your teaching.

1. Tell me about yourself and your teaching.

2. Tell me about where you teach, and your experiences there or other places you have taught?

3. Tell me some stories and/or examples of working with students in your classroom? What do you do? What do you have your students do?

4. When you think about students with disabilities, what do you think about? Tell me some stories about working with students with disabilities, that is illustrative of your experience working with them? Any out of the norm?

5. How do you feel about having students with disabilities in your classroom? Why do you feel that way?
6. What do you think shaped your thinking or perceptions about students with disabilities? Did you used to think about them one way and now another? How so? Why so?

7. Did you have any personal or professional experiences where you worked with students with disabilities?

8. Are there things that you do in the classroom and your teaching that is different when you have students with disabilities? What are they? And why do you do those things? [Probe, then …] Did you always do those things? If not, what prompted you to do those things?