You’re On Your Own, Kid:

A study on how general education teachers experience working with students with disabilities

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Abstract

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The United States public education system has a disconnect between teachers' experiences and ever-growing student heterogeneity – heterogeneity in race, ethnicity, language, cultural background, and disability. Disability is now understood as an identity that contributes to the intersectionality of how students experience school. While the number of students with disabilities who need differentiated educational support increases, the training and support teachers receive have not kept pace with student needs. This study investigated how four general education teachers at an elementary school in Washington State experience working with students with disabilities and explores common themes and experiences teachers may have. Applying the theoretical foundation of DisCrit (Annamma, 2013) and the Model of Teacher Identity (Mockler, 2011), this qualitative study used in-depth interviews and thematic analysis to understand how teacher identity impacts participants' work with students with disabilities. This work contributes to the growing body of literature aimed at improving schooling for all students.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Public schooling in the United States is the launchpad for capitalism and caters to the needs of white, non-disabled, male, straight, Christian, and wealthy students (Schneller, 2017; Dudley-Marling & Dippo, 1995). The education system was designed to oppress those who do not fit neatly into those categories. American schools define success in narrow, specific ways (Varenne, 2018). As Cioè-Peña (2020) states, "When we are deciding where to put students in schools, we are deciding how far from 'normal' they are." We believe in the myth that there is such a thing as a "normal child" (Baglieri et al., 2011). When students do not fit this fictitious idea of normality, they are often referred for evaluations for special education services, frequently validating that perception of "abnormality" (Hodkinson, 2015). Students are then likely placed in segregated settings, with less access to high-quality education and statistically worse outcomes (Owens, 2018).

The power that teachers hold cannot be overstated. "Everything you do as a teacher has an impact – there is no neutral" (LaBoskey, 2013). Teacher expectations can become self-fulfilling prophecies for students, particularly those with marginalized identities (López, 2017; Jussim & Harber, 2005). When acting with less awareness, teachers can reproduce larger societal patterns, including perpetuating "stereotype threat," the concept that a person will perform a task based on the stereotyped expectation of their identity (Steele, 2011). This is not to say that teachers are innately evil or hope that children will fail; it is quite the opposite. Teachers are human and, like all humans, hold subconscious assumptions, and these assumptions subconsciously guide behavior. Teaching is inherently political and the cornerstone of a democracy (Nieto, 2006). Because of this, teachers must examine their biases and consider

the power and positionality they hold as the head of the classroom (Santamaría Graff et al., 2020).

One of the biggest challenges facing today's general education teachers is working with the growing number of students with disabilities. This is exacerbated by current school staff shortages, particularly in special education teacher and paraprofessional positions (Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019; García & Weiss, 2019). While special education teachers receive training specific to support students with disabilities, general education teacher programs often limit disability education to a single class (Cooc, 2019). This narrow scope of identity, in which disability is seen as a singular, isolated characteristic, perpetuates systemic injustices against students with multiple marginalized identities (i.e., students of color with disabilities) (Annamma, 2011) by pathologizing students with disabilities.

Understanding Teacher Identity

Teacher identity is a complex concept (Hanna, 2019). It is ever evolving, changing across time and experience (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004; Guadelli & Ousley, 2009). While learning how to teach content and developing pedagogy is central to teacher identity, many other factors contribute to the identity growth of teachers (Garner & Kaplan, 2019). Mockler (2011) designed a theoretical framework for conceptualizing teacher identity with three overlapping categories: personal experience, professional context, and political environment. In Mockler's model, teachers must grapple with their identities and experiences within their school and political contexts. Therefore, no teacher's identity is the same as another, regardless of shared context (Rood, 2021). These professional identities heavily impact teacher practices and choices (Ávalos & De Los Rios, 2013).

Understanding teacher identity is crucial to understanding how to move toward educational justice. Szocik et al. (2021) found that general education teachers often believed there was very little they could do to support students with disabilities. Szocik et al. identified several aspects of teacher identity that positively impact teacher views about inclusive practices. When teachers examine their positionality in the classroom, teaching as a profession, and meeting the needs of all students, their confidence and awareness of disability issues and inclusion increases (Tournaki & Samuels, 2016).

Cochran-Smith and Dudley-Marling (2012) examined the tensions between general and special education teachers. They found a divide between the two groups of teachers due to positionality and disciplinary traditions. Teachers in both groups saw little need for collaboration and treated the two categories of educational service as different careers. This poses a significant challenge to inclusion work as a collaboration between teachers across disciplines is crucial to ending segregated special education programs (Cochran-Smith & Dudley-Marling). Unfortunately, research has shown that teachers who resist injustices in schools often feel isolated (Picower, 2021; Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006). Teachers need a core belief and understanding of the importance of inclusion, so that schools can move away from being predominately exclusive spaces (Baglieri, 2008). However, teacher preparation programs that value inclusion can begin to build communities of teachers who can be influential supporters of one another and advocate for systems change.

Systemically and individually, several factors contribute to the continuation of segregated special education services. To make any substantive change, schools, teacher preparation programs, and teachers must become co-conspirators committed to pursuing

educational justice for all students (Annamma et al., 2013). The vulnerability required for this kind of change is not easy; neither is the monumental shift needed in how students with disabilities are viewed. If schools truly want to pursue equity and inclusion, the commitment to valuing students with disabilities must be unwavering.

One of the most important shifts that has to be made in education is the misunderstanding of what disability is. Historically, disability has been seen as a personal failing. In reality, disability only exists because of systemic failings. Teachers must understand that disability is a socially constructed concept, an idea created and accepted by society, not based on objective reality (Bunbury, 2019).

Investigating how teachers see and understand disability provides a significant opportunity on the path toward intersectional justice. To truly move toward intersectional educational justice, teachers need to understand the complexity of disability and its intersections with race and gender, as well as other identities held by students (Tefera & Fischman, 2020; Kulkarni et al., 2021). If teachers understand that disability is a deeply nuanced concept, they can examine their perceptions and work to meet all students' needs better.

Educators have an ethical obligation to shift so that discussing disability and identifying people as having a disability is not pathologizing. Disability is a socially constructed phenomenon resulting from disabling environments that do not honor an individual’s physical, cognitive, sensory, or emotional differences. Educators must work to understand the term disability and identify how school systems participate in oppressing students. “Dysconscious ableism” (initially coined by King, 1991) has recently been expanded by Broderick and Lalvani (2017) and referred to as a lack of critical self-reflection about how society is structured without

considering people with disabilities. In school, dysconsicous ableism can lead to an over-referral of students for special education evaluations or the belief that students should be excluded from general education. Due to this lack of disability-centered education and training, teachers will likely engage in dysconscious ableism without explicit professional development and personal reflection.

Research Problem

Most general education teachers have not received formal training in working with students who need special education services (Douglas et al., 2016; Cochran-Smith & Dudley-Marling, 2012). Yet almost all public school teachers in 2023 have students in their classrooms who need differentiated instruction or social-emotional support (Tomlinson, 2023). Teachers are agents of change, whether positive or negative, and they hold immense power in the lives of their students (Bourn, 2016). Despite the frequently stated commitment of general education training programs to prepare teachers to work with all students, many general education teachers feel unprepared to work with students with disabilities (Byrd, 2020). As the diversity and needs of student populations increase, the need for teachers to have the knowledge and support to work with every student in their class is crucial (Pozas, 2020). The first step in moving towards this goal of understanding disability as a socially constructed concept is to understand how teachers experience working with students with disabilities.

Investigating how teachers see and think about disability provides a significant opportunity on the path toward intersectional justice. To truly move toward intersectional educational justice, teachers need to consider the complexity of disability and its intersections with race and gender, as well as other identities held by students. Teachers need to understand

that disability is a socially constructed concept. If teachers realize disability is a socially constructed concept, they can examine their perceptions and better work to meet all students' needs (Connor, 2019). Educators have an ethical obligation to shift so that discussing disability and identifying people as having a disability is not pathologizing (Suhr & Johnson, 2022). Educators must work to value the term disability and identify the sites of student oppression. "Dysconscious ableism" (initially coined by King, 1991) has recently been expanded by Broderick and Lalvani (2017) and referred to as a lack of critical self-reflection. Teachers will likely engage in dysconscious ableism without explicit professional development and personal reflection.

More research is needed to understand better how to empower general education teachers to work with students with disabilities. While serious issues perpetuate disproportionality in special education (Tefera & Fischman, 2020), teachers can play a significant role in rectifying the problem (Aloi & Bialka, 2022). However, it is clear that general education teachers do not feel prepared or supported in their work with students with disabilities and that systemic barriers prevent the necessary preparation and support.

While research addresses preparation programs (Foley, 2022; Barrio, 2021), there is no known research on how general education teachers experience working with students with disabilities. This study aims to understand that experience better and set up future research and practice opportunities to continue growing teacher capacity and knowledge.

Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to explore how a group of general education teachers who teach the same grade in the same school understand disability and experience working with students with disabilities in public school. Using qualitative methods and individual interviews, I elicit the

stories that have shaped how this team of teachers conceptualizes their roles and the larger public school system concerning disability. Through this exploration, I gained a clearer understanding of what general education teachers need to improve their pedagogy and practice when considering inclusion and disability.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do teachers' personal and professional experiences shape their understanding of disability throughout their lives?

RQ2: How do general education teachers understand the system of special education and their role within it?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter details the theoretical frameworks, relevant literature, and conceptual framework that I created to frame this study. I used two theoretical frameworks to ground this work; DisCrit (Annamma et al., 2013) and the Teacher Identity Model (Mockler, 2011). Along with a review of current literature around disability and general education teachers, those theoretical frameworks combined made up the conceptual framework that guided my data collection. This literature review is structured to support educational decision-makers to better understand the need for prioritizing Special Education and teacher support in funding and policy decisions.

Theoretical Frameworks

Disability Studies and DisCrit

One often overlooked identity in justice movements and research literature is the construct of disability. Many medical and mental health professionals continue to pathologize disabilities, othering and oppressing those who are disabled or not neurotypical. Disability Studies (DS) have been excluded from conversations of justice for as long as there have been conversations of justice, much as people with disabilities have been excluded from societal systems like schools. DS refers to the academic field of scholars who examine how disability is a form of cultural difference. Reid and Knight (2006) describe how disability has been used to justify school exclusion, particularly of Black and Brown children. Students with disabilities have been defined as “other,” leading to systemic segregation and oppression. Historically, disability studies have focused on disability solely through the experience of disabled white people (Stapleton & James, 2020).

In 2013, Annamma, Ferri, and Connor suggested a new theoretical framework to examine disability more nuancedly. They proposed the idea of DisCrit: a way to see disability as intertwined with racial identity. DisCrit weaves intersectionality, Critical Race Theory (CRT), and DS. CRT is the critical study of how race and experiences of racism can explain social, political, and legal structures, as well as power. Seven tenets of DisCrit define the framework. Table 1 shows how Annamma illustrates each tenet and how those tenets can be used as an analytical tool.

Table 1: Tenets of DisCrit as Analytic Tools

DisCrit Tenet	Applying DisCrit as an Analytic Tool
1. "DisCrit focuses on the ways that the forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normalcy." (p. 13)	Racism and ableism work interdependently in "neutralized and invisible ways."
2. "DisCrit values multidimensional identities and troubles singular notions of identity such as race or disability or class or gender or sexuality, and so on." (p. 13)	Multidimensional notions of identity vs. singular notions of identity.
3. "DisCrit emphasizes the social constructions of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or disabled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms." (p. 13)	Material and psychological impacts of the social construction of race and ability.

4. “DisCrit privileges voices of marginalized populations, traditionally now acknowledged within research.” (p. 13)	Marginalized vs. dominant voices
5. “DisCrit consideres legal and historical aspects of disability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens.” (p. 13)	Historical and legal legacy of racism and ableism.
6. “DisCrit recognizes whiteness and ability as property and that gains for people labeled with disabilities have lately been made as a result of the interst convergence of white, middle-class citizens.” (p. 13)	Whiteness and ability as property and interest convergence.
7. “DisCrit requires activism and supports all forms of resistance.” (p. 13)	Support for all forms of resistance.

Note. Modified from Annamma et al., 2013.

Annamma points out that race and ability function interdependently, especially in special education. This is true both in my personal experience as a full inclusion teacher and statistically. For example, 17% of students in special education identify as Native American, but they make up only 1% of the U.S. student population (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2022). The current conversation in most educational spaces acknowledges the racial disproportionality of students with special education services. Educators are aware of the problem. However, the currently utilized solutions (Harry & Klingner, 2022; Barrio, 2021; Agran

et al., 2020) fail to address systemic inequity. Tenet five of DisCrit can help frame this as the lasting impact of the history and governmental policies regarding race and people with disabilities.

Yet another piece of intersectional justice that cannot be ignored is who holds the decision-making power in all educational spaces. This requires leaning on tenet four of DisCrit: prioritizing the voices of those most commonly excluded from the dominant narrative (Annamma et al., 2013). Rarely, if ever, are students – particularly Black and Brown students labeled with disabilities - consulted on what services and supports they would find most helpful (Nolan-Spohn, 2016). When placed in special education, it almost guarantees they are stripped of any self-determination in their educational journeys, likely their lives. Educators regularly hold meetings about students without the students present. They systematically silence students' voices, which truly matter when making big decisions about their lives.

DisCrit can help get beneath the surface of how we label students and move into an understanding of how white supremacy and race are woven into disability perceptions and status. DisCrit tenet three acknowledges that race and disability are socially constructed identities and intrinsically linked (Annamma et al., 2013). This is visible in schools, yet there is little active resistance or policy change to rectify the problem. Beneke et al. (2022) examined the use of DisCrit in classroom spaces. They found that using the lens of DisCrit in approaching teaching and learning can create opportunities to wrestle with critical questions about intersectionality. A DisCrit approach to teaching can also open space for deconstructing and analyzing the current schooling structures that perpetuate racism and ableism (Annamma et al., 2013).

In educational spaces, tenet seven, emphasizing the importance of action, is critical. Learning about intersectionality, disability, positionality, systems, oppression, and power is deeply important and personal. The greatest gains in impacting students occur when educators engage in activism themselves and those they work with. Further, mutual support and support of students' resistance will result in better academic and life outcomes for all students and an education system that works for more students.

Understanding the greater historical and conceptual context, particularly about disability, is crucial for this conceptual framework. The following sections include the history of disability, disabilities in schools, disability labels, placement in special education, and disproportionality in special education.

History of Disability. The history of the United States is marked by denying basic human rights to historically marginalized populations, including people with disability labels. This tendency is evident in excluding those with disabilities from many public spaces throughout history. Shifrer & Frederick (2019) describe that in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, "ugly laws" were used to exclude individuals experiencing poverty or disability. At the same time, racial segregation was legal in the South, immigration laws did not allow people with disabilities to enter the US, and the eugenics movement (a scientifically erroneous and immoral theory of race) was becoming popular (Schweik, 2009). This dark moment in time illustrates the centuries-long enmeshment of race, gender, ethnicity, disability, and nationality as other tools of exclusion in the US (Artiles, 2013).

Before the year 2000, the majority of work on intersectional disability (understanding disability in conjunction with other identities such as race and gender) was framed by the

"medical model," which presumes that disability is an individual "problem" and ignores any social or historical factors (Hogan, 2019). The medical model oversimplifies a person, narrowing their identity to race or disability without considering that social class and gender might also impact how disability is seen (Artiles, 2013). Using an intersectional framework opens the door to focusing on what it means to label individuals and the consequences of those labels (Annamma et al., 2013). There is a significant lack of studies focused on students with disability labels, especially regarding intersectional identities. There must be a focus on the power structures that play into all identities to truly understand how all identities intersect.

Disabilities in Schools. The special education institution in the United States originated with legislation intended to support students with disabilities in public schools. However, the history of special education is problematic as disability has long been stigmatized, and those with disabilities have been historically oppressed. The intersection of other identities, such as race, ethnicity, and gender, also affects how students with disabilities are seen and labeled. When evaluating students, it is vital to recognize the inequities and biases that can emerge and, in doing so, actively work to resist educational injustice.

The most recent data accessible from the Department of Education is from the 2019-2020 school year. In 2019-2020, 7.3 million students (14.4% of total public school enrollment) qualified for special education services under IDEA (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Of the students served, 18.3% were Indigenous American/Alaska Native, 16.6% were Black, 15.4% were two or more races, 14.7% were white, 13.8% were Latinx, 11.2% were Pacific Islander, 7.1% were Asian. If examined through population comparison, this means that 8.6% of all white students in public schools receive special education services, while 12.2% of Black and

15.1% of Indigenous students qualify for services (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). These percentages are significant as they far exceed the proportion of the total population for Black and Indigenous students, but not for white or Asian students. This is referred to as disproportionality (Oswald et al., 1999). In addition, across every racial category, boys are more likely to be identified as needing special education services than girls (Fish, 2022).

Placement in special education has severe implications for a child's future. While intended to support children's education, special education placement can have dire unintended consequences that marginalize already targeted students. Inequitable outcomes for students with a disability label include lower academic achievement, a higher rate of school dropout, discipline inequities, and a higher likelihood of interacting with the juvenile justice system (Artiles, 2019). Students who have been in special education have lower employment rates and are less likely to attend college (Sanford et al., 2011). Once students have been identified for special education, they tend to remain in special education, which researchers call a "failure to return" to special education (Carteledge, 2005). Thus, putting students into special education programming has heavy, life-altering consequences.

Disability Labels. To receive special education services, a student must be labeled[1] with one of the 13 disabilities listed under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This label is attached to their services' legal record (IEP or 504) and matriculates through their education with them until they exit special education or graduate from 12th grade. This

[1] The word choice of "labeled" instead of "diagnosed" is intentional, as school psychologists cannot diagnose disabilities. Instead, they can qualify students using one of the 13 disability category labels, which is not a medical diagnosis.

disability label is determined by standardized evaluations conducted by a school psychologist. Once the assessment process is complete, the school team is tasked with determining whether or not the child is eligible for special education services and, if so, which category they qualify for and which services would be beneficial. Shifrer and Fish (2020) found that there is a problem of unreliable diagnoses due to inconsistent criteria and subjectivity; that category designation for special education services only occasionally occurs reliably in schools.

After students qualify for special education services, their placement is determined by a school team. IDEA (2004) states that students must be placed in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), meaning the goal is to spend as much time in a general education classroom as possible. Students of color are more likely to be placed in a segregated school setting, regardless of their socioeconomic status, so socioeconomic status is insufficient in explaining placement disproportionality (Grindal et al., 2019; Hernández-Saca et al., 2018).

Because Black and Latiné students are more likely to be labeled with the more stigmatized disability categories with higher rates of segregated students like ED and ID (Kurth et al., 2014), Black and Latiné students are subsequently more likely to be placed in segregated settings. Students labeled with emotional disability (ED) and intellectual disability (ID) are more frequently left out of general education settings than their peers with different disability labels. This exclusion lowers their access to the general education curriculum. It isolates them from neurotypical students (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, & Office of Special Education Programs, 2015).

In their article “Is the use of labels in special education helpful?” Lauchlan and Boyle (2007) present five arguments and corresponding counterarguments for the use of labels. Their

ultimate assertion is that labels need to exist and can be helpful with determining treatment, providing comfort to students and families by "explaining" a disability, as well as providing people with a social identity. However, labeling can also take the focus off the individual and their specific needs. Labeling can stigmatize, isolate, and create a deficit mindset for students.

Disability labeling can also become a status competition (Skrtic et al., 2021). There is a hierarchy of disability categories, wherein students of color are more likely to be labeled with categories that carry stigma (like intellectual disability or emotional disability). In contrast, white students are likelier to be labeled with a medical condition (like visual impairment or autism) (Cruz & Firestone, 2022). Three disabilities are generally considered "higher status" (Skrtic et al.) Other Health Impairment (OHI), Speech and Language Impairment (SLI), and autism. A "higher status" disability refers to a label with less stigma and fewer stereotypes associated with the disability. Students with these labels are more likely to be in inclusive settings, with more access to grade-level content and neurotypical peers (Blanchett, 2010; Ong-Dean, 2009). Students with these labels can also present as more stereotypically intelligent than peers with other labels (Charman et al., 2011). Additionally, higher parent education predicts greater odds of a student receiving an autism label, but the opposite is true for most other categories. Cruz and Firestone posit that this may be due to the increased resources that come with the category of autism.

In contrast, the "lower status" categories are emotional disability (ED) and intellectual disability (ID) (Skrtic et al., 2021). ED is considered the most accurate label for students with significant behavioral challenges associated with juvenile incarceration (Charak et al., 2019; Rutherford et al., 2002) and higher rates of disciplinary problems. The label ID combines a low IQ score and difficulty with adaptive behavior (Fish, 2019). Intelligence is highly valued in

schools, which creates even more of a deficit lens for students with ID labels. Students with ED and ID labels are more likely to be in segregated classrooms, associating them with lower academic expectations and with other students who struggle with challenging behaviors (National Council on Disability, 2018).

Disproportionality in Special Education. Current literature on disproportionality, disability identification, and qualification for special education services does not paint a clear picture of the scope of the problem of disproportionality. Most of the special education policy and public discourse is focused on the disproportionality of students of color as an indicator of bias and racism (Barrio et al., 2022; Morgan, 2020; Tefera & Fischman, 2020) and indeed, that is a large part of the problem. However, this perspective lacks the understanding that the special education identification and placement process is profoundly subjective and cannot be disentangled from the social construct of disability (Fish, 2019).

Disproportionality in special education can be understood as the overidentification of students who hold historically marginalized identities, sometimes referred to as “minority” identities (Leung, 2021). These identities include but are not limited to gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual identity, and multi-lingual status. Disproportionality is not a straightforward problem with a clear solution. It is deeply interwoven with the social construct of “normality” and is molded by systemic inequities and failures (Hamilton, 2019; Sullivan & Artiles, 2011). Thus, implications for practice and policy changes are debated, and there is no clarity on the best way to serve students or even the actual problem with special education identification. The research is also limited in terms of which populations of students have been studied. A recent review of empirical studies looking at disproportionality from 1986 to 2006 (n

= 42) stated that 40% focused only on the representation of Black students, 25% explored the patterns of LD identification, and many of the studies were limited to the southern United States (Waitoller et al., 2010). Some scholars argue that the overrepresentation of students with marginalized identities has essentially turned special education into legalized segregation and institutional racism (Elder et al., 2021).

In addition, some literature reports that students of color are over-identified for specific disability categories associated with more social stigma than white students (Fish, 2019). In contrast, Paul Morgan (2015) claims that students of color are under-identified as having disabilities and are less likely to receive special education services than their white peers. Problematically, Morgan's research only looked at five categories of disability instead of all thirteen. Other researchers pointed out methodological flaws in Morgan's work. Skiba et al. (2016) have also critiqued Morgan's work, calling it an oversimplification of special education disproportionality. A possible explanation for contradicting interpretations of disproportionality data is that the nuances of disability identification and special education placement are more complex and require more than just looking at the racial identities of students who receive special education services. While disproportionality in special education is often described as institutional racism, several additional factors contribute to the problem.

This overrepresentation of students who hold marginalized identities is generally observed in the stigmatized categories of learning disability (LD), emotional disabilities (ED), and intellectual disability (ID) (National Education Association, 2007). Unsurprisingly, LD, ED, and ID are also considered to be the most subjective categories and, therefore rely on professional judgment instead of physical or medical diagnoses (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

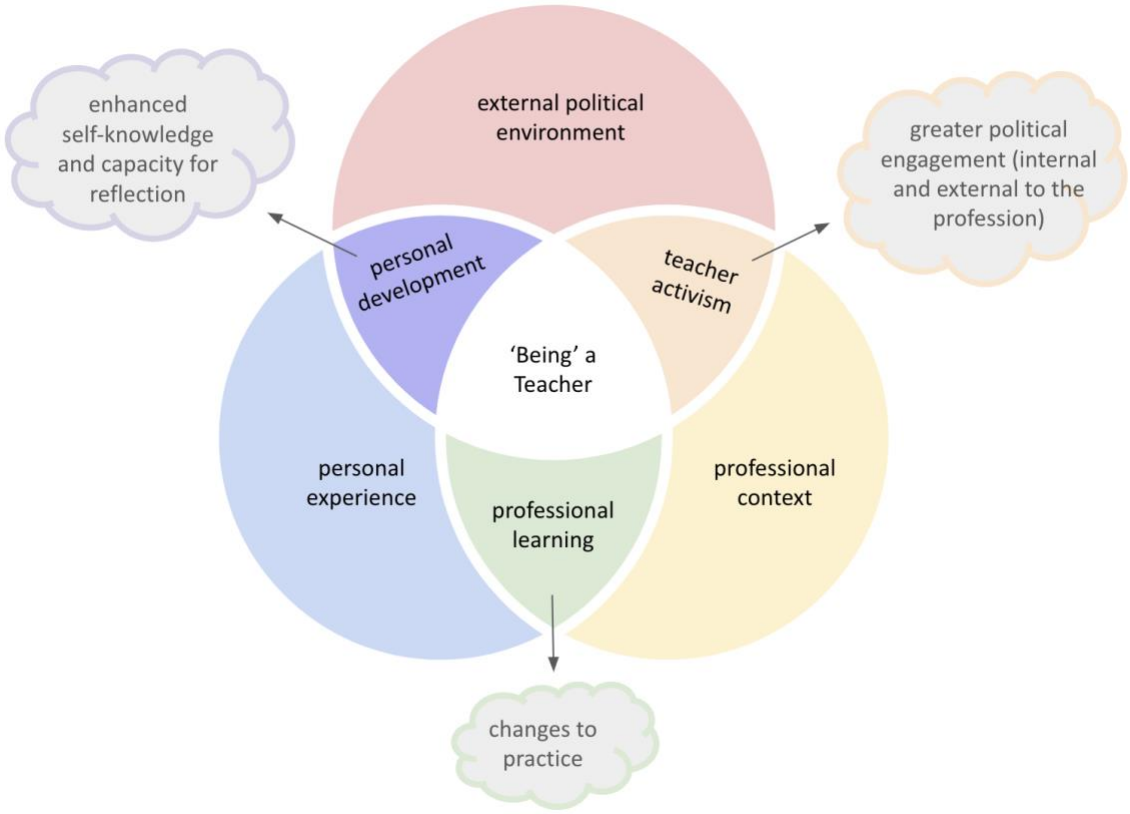
Disproportionality is not an individual or community problem. It is a systems problem due to the inequitable treatment of specific communities and populations, namely those who do not hold identities that uphold Western cultural norms. The focus in addressing disproportionality should not be on addressing individual differences but on the systems that have created this disproportional treatment (Annamma et al., 2014).

In public school systems, teachers play a pivotal role in disability identification. General education teachers can refer students for special education evaluations based on the student's performance in the classroom. In the next section, the Teacher Identity Model (Mockler, 2011) and related literature will shed more light on how teachers fit into disability labeling and special education.

Teacher Identity Model

Teacher identity is a complex concept with many factors. Mockler (2011) created a nuanced framework to conceptualize the understanding of teachers' professional identities and what it means to "be" a teacher. Mockler acknowledges that understanding professional identity is a deeply complex task. For her purposes, she defines "teacher professional identity" as "the way that teachers, both individually and collectively, view and understand themselves as teachers" (p. 519). She posits that understanding this complex identity is crucial to understanding schools and education. Mockler also emphasizes that teacher identity is constantly evolving, and that teacher identity is a tool that can be used to grow the teaching profession.

Figure 1: Mockler's (2011) Teacher Identity Model



As shown in Figure 1, there are three main areas of Mockler's (2011) teacher identity model: personal experience, professional context, and external political environment. Mockler states that "these domains work in a reflexive, constantly shifting dynamic, and the impact of each change in significance and strength, dependent upon circumstantial and contextual catalysts" (p. 520).

Personal experience refers to how teachers' lives are shaped by their intersectional identities, including class, gender, ability/disability, and race, as well as their own experiences of school as students. Passions, culture, and family systems also influence personal experience. Teachers' professional context can be understood as their experiences within educational

contexts, including career history, ongoing professional development, and involvement in professional associations, unions, and networks. The external political environment includes discourses around teaching through media and government policy.

Mockler illustrates that personal experience, professional context, and external political environment overlap to create more teacher-specific categories: personal development, professional learning, and teacher activism. Finally, Mockler connects these categories to identify catalysts that call for changes to practice, enhanced self-knowledge and capacity for reflection, and greater political engagement. Mockler refers to these catalysts as the "anchors" of teacher identity and action. Mockler's framework clarifies my research questions by organizing teacher identity into these catalysts.

Teachers' Understanding of Disability. In policy, special education is defined as a service, not a place. It is unclear how special education became rife with isolated classrooms, especially since IDEA does not define special education but provides guidelines to best help students receive free appropriate public education program (FAPE) (Cioè-Peña, 2017). However, the reality is that the term "special education" frequently means being educated in an isolated setting. The alternative to providing special education services in separate locations is through inclusion (Krischler et al., 2019). In educational spaces, inclusion means including students with disabilities and providing special education services in general education classrooms. Inclusion can range from a fully inclusive setting with no isolated special education classrooms in an entire district to students with special education labels spending most of their time in a segregated classroom and joining a general education classroom for a specialist class, like art or PE.

Even within a fully inclusive school, how a teacher runs their classroom can heavily influence the extent to which students with disability labels are included. Research on inclusion has shown that teachers and administrators were supportive of inclusion for students with visible disabilities (physical disabilities, specific language impairment), but they were unsupportive of inclusion for students with less visible disabilities (ED, ID) (Kauffman, 2022; Dreyer et al., 2020). There was also a disconnect between teachers' ratings of adapting systems for more inclusion and the feasibility of such implementations (Agran et al., 2020), meaning that while teachers were interested in inclusion practices, there were significant logistical and structural barriers (Woodgate et al., 2020). Results showed that teachers who worked with students with disabilities became more comfortable working with students with a broader range of needs. When students with severe disabilities were included in their classes, 17 out of 19 teachers reported increased comfort and “transformative” experiences for themselves (Giangreco et al., 1993). Studies have shown that students without disabilities experience social benefits from being in inclusive settings and that academic impacts for students without disabilities are mixed (Kart & Kart, 2021). However, the crucial element to successful inclusion is school staff attitudes and willingness to make fundamental changes (Saloviita, 2020).

Teacher Training and Preparation Programs. In Mockler’s Teacher Identity Model, professional learning is at the intersection of personal experience and professional context. The paths that teachers take to become credentialed educators have a significant impact on their identity. While some teachers go through traditional preparation programs and gain student teaching experience, others take alternate routes to credentialing. The quality and scope of a

teacher's preparation influences how teachers relate to and understand their students, particularly those with disabilities.

In 2002, the Secretary of Education's annual report to Congress analyzing teacher quality stated that university programs, the traditional form of teacher training, were a "broken system" (McDonald & Zeichner, 2009). Largely due to that report, many alternate paths to obtaining a teaching license were created, and in 2016, 18% of teachers took one of those less traditional paths (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2022). People can now become public school teachers after one month of training through programs such as Teach for America or Oakland Teaching Fellows, to name two. The defense of these programs is that teachers will receive support in their first years of teaching, essentially "learning on the job." In contrast, traditional programs require a year of student teaching under the tutelage of veteran teachers with a gradual release model into taking over a classroom. There is a stark difference between the quality and amount of training for teachers who go through these two different types of programs. Laczko-Kerr and Berliner (2002) found that students with teachers who took non-traditional routes to certification had 20% less academic growth than teachers who completed traditional programs.

In 2022, there is such a teacher shortage that several states are reducing their requirements for teachers even further (Balingit, 2022). California, Missouri, Alabama, and New Jersey are among the states where the exam requirements have been lessened to allow more people to qualify for teaching credentials. The National Guard was called to serve as substitute teachers in New Mexico in early 2022 (Fordham, 2022). In Florida, military veterans with no prior teaching experience can become teachers in the 2022-2023 school year. The list goes on

and on across nearly every state. While the teacher shortage is an absolute crisis for all students, it is especially harmful to students already marginalized by the school system. While the current national priority is to get qualified teachers into classrooms, teacher preparation programs cannot let go of the imperative need to strive for justice in teacher training.

Research on the pedagogy of teacher preparation programs shows that programs often put language around social justice into written materials without pushing against problematic practices in their teaching (McDonald & Zeichner, 2009). Further complicating the concept of social justice in education is the lack of clarity around what social justice means and how to use it both in teacher preparation programs and classrooms (Pugach et al., 2021). Artiles et al. (2006) also point out that the discourse around social justice in education, particularly around inclusion, frequently illuminates contradicting understandings of social justice. Thus, translating the ideology of social and educational justice from theory to practice does not run a straightforward path. Additionally, Baglieri (2008) points out that researchers frequently and incorrectly presume that understanding disability-related teaching strategies translates to positive attitudes about inclusion and working with students with disabilities.

Research has shown that lecture-based courses that provide information about disability categories and utilize the medical model are less impactful in helping future teachers value and understand inclusive education (Baglieri, 2008). Instead, courses should seek to engage preservice teachers in learning from the experiences of people in the disability community and utilizing a social model that encourages analysis of disability and education (Baglieri). When teacher preparation programs commit to centering the values of inclusive education, teachers can "develop a value for disabled persons' experiences and capacities,

identify and perform a critique of exclusionary school practices, and gain vitality and philosophy to understand inclusive education as a moral and ethical imperative" (Baglieri, 2008, p. 589).

Teacher preparation programs must adopt a DisCrit lens throughout courses and practical experiences. Teachers must be trained to navigate the dynamics of racism and ableism in their classrooms (Beneke & Cheatham, 2020; Hancock, Morgan & Holly, 2021). For teachers to exit preparation programs and enter the classroom prepared to critically engage in analyzing their schools' practices around special education, preparation programs must move away from the medical model (Loreman et al., 2007). Teacher education programs that provide explicit perspectives and frameworks that contradict the medical model of disability are more likely to lead to teachers feeling positive about working with students with a disability label and advocating for inclusive teaching strategies (Baglieri, 2008).

Researchers have identified several strategies for teacher preparation programs to adopt that have been shown to expand teacher learning about inclusion and students with disabilities. First, Kamens et al. (2000) emphasize the importance of teachers understanding disability labels. Mock & Kauffman (2002) add that all teachers need training in understanding specific special education instructional methods, laws around the rights of special education students, and legal documentation. Teachers should also be well-versed in collaborative teaching strategies (Whitaker, 2000) and classroom culture strategies (Yellin et al., 2003).

Beyond those methods, the most crucial element of training teachers to support students with disabilities and understand special education is giving pre-service teachers practical experience and direct contact with students with disabilities (Loreman & Earle, 2007). Within these experiences, teachers need to be provided with ample space to reflect and

understand the experiences of their students with disabilities (Baglieri, 2008). Special education and general education content should be part of every teacher training program. Such coursework is pivotal for informing future teaching practices and attitudes toward students and for empowering teachers to challenge problematic systems (Tournaki & Samuels, 2016; Pugach et al., 2021, Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Ashby, 2012). In line with tenet seven of DisCrit, teacher education programs must prepare teachers to be disruptors and change agents (Peters & Reid, 2009). When a program truly embodies the values and ethics of a critical disabilities studies lens, teachers exiting the program should enter schools ready to reimagine school systems in ways that promote justice for all students.

Fornauf and Mascio (2021) conducted a study on a rural teacher education program in the Northeastern United States that focused on pushing back against the deficit lens often applied to rural schools. Researchers used the theories of DisCrit and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which is a framework that aims to give students more autonomy over their learning and become expert learners and is a lens that is often employed in more inclusive education settings. The goal of the study was to use DisCrit and UDL in tandem to help teachers examine their understanding of the structural inequities, specifically in rural schools, and to use a curriculum to counteract them. This study illustrated the importance of education professors' self-reflection and how crucial it is to consider the context in which teachers work. A more specific focus on place and positionality led to a deeper understanding of positionality and power for teachers.

While it is only one facet of the teacher identity model, professional learning is crucial in allowing teachers to understand and expand their knowledge of students and systems. As

discussed in the next section, teacher training and understanding of disability heavily impact how they navigate the referral process and engage in furthering disproportionality.

Teacher Identity and Referrals. In most schools across the US, white teachers are the majority (Sleeter, 2023). Teachers hold incredible power in the special education evaluation process and contribute heavily to the problem of disproportionality (Thorius, 2019). Most referrals for special education evaluation are made by teachers (Harry & Klingner, 2022), who are also primarily responsible for data collection and intervention implementation.

In a study that bridged teacher identity and understanding of special education systems, Siuty (2019) conducted a critical ethnography where she explored the tensions between a master's program that asks students to examine identity and power structures and an exclusive school setting. Her study participants were four special education teachers who had graduated from the same master's program within the last three years and were teaching in urban schools. Siuty conducted interviews, observed participants, and analyzed the syllabi of courses from the master's program. She found that the program exposed the four teachers to how systems of inequity functioned and their own positionality.

Siuty's (2019) study raises several applicable points about disability justice in education. First, special education teachers considered special education labels "objective," despite research showing that tests used to identify students for special education services are inherently racist (Sattler, 2014). How students are assigned a disability was not unpacked or questioned by these special education teachers, which is a systemic problem. Second, Siuty's examination of the program syllabi showed that instructors focused on the dominant medical model, which perceives differences as problems that need to be treated. The medical model

also places the onus on the individual with the “problem” to solve it themself. Finally, Siuty noted that there was little opportunity in the program and school settings for teachers to engage in reflective processes or identity work, even though the program used a (DSE) lens.

When referring students for special education evaluations, teachers generally do so based on either low academic achievement or challenging behaviors, though behavior is the predominant reason students are referred for evaluations (Redding, 2019; Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 1986; Hosp & Reschly, 2004; Skiba et al., 2008). This holds even more true for Black students and males (Bryan et al., 2012; Gottlieb et al., 1987). Often, teachers view special education services as some of the few resources to help their struggling students (Gottlieb et al., 1987; Skiba et al., 2006). Teacher referrals are frequently validated by the eventual label and student placement decision (Harry & Klingner, 2022). Still, it is essential to note that these referrals tend to deviate from using data collection or other objective measures and rely more on teacher perception (Dowdy et al., 2013). Teacher knowledge and referrals are based on their experience of how a “typical” student performs in their classroom. However, various teaching skills and contextual factors cause teacher judgment to be subjective and internalized narratives about race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and language (Fish, 2017; Gerber, 2005). It is imperative to note that most students referred for an evaluation by a teacher are subsequently qualified for special education services (Reynolds et al., 2021; Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 1986; Hosp & Reschly, 2003). Teachers' influence on students qualifying for special education cannot be understated. Perhaps due to this power, teachers act as diagnosticians and interpret behavior without objective data, leading to inappropriate referrals due to a limited understanding of disabilities.

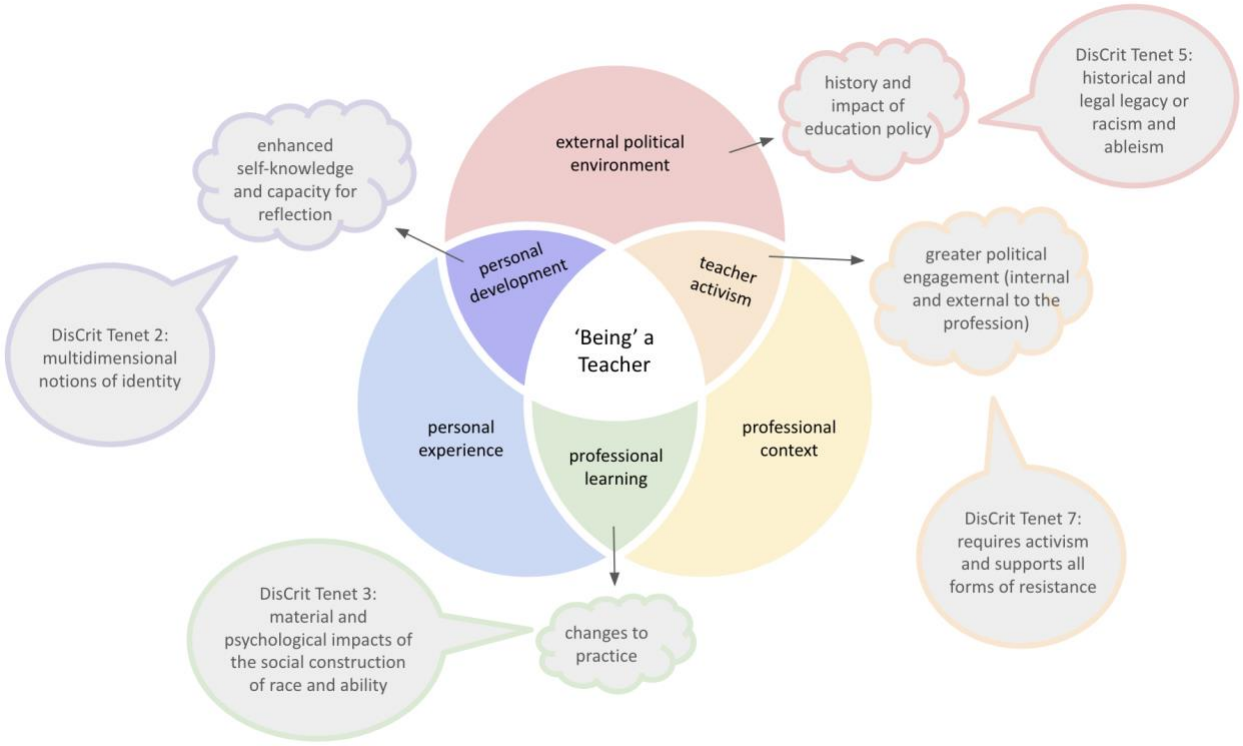
In a recent study, Fish (2022) qualitatively examined special education disproportionately through the lens of teachers, conducting 27 interviews. Her findings further confirmed much of what has already been documented in research. She found that gender narratives cause teachers to under-refer girls, who more frequently struggle with internalizing challenges than boys (Mayes et al., 2020; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001). Biases of race, gender, and socioeconomic status heavily influence teachers' lower expectations for Black, Indigenous, and Latiné students, particularly girls (Gentrup et al., 2020; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007). These beliefs cause white teachers to overemphasize behavior problems for students of color (Ramey, 2015) while reducing their awareness of academic challenges in students of color, especially girls of color (Fish, 2022). Teacher perceptions of girls of color also held these students to a higher level of responsibility for their behaviors and performances and, consequently, cited that as evidence of non-disability (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). This judgment lowers the odds of additional support for Black, Latina, and Indigenous girls. Fish's research also highlights teachers' misplaced power in understanding students' challenges before referring them. Teachers expressed to Fish that they did not understand much about disabilities, which likely led to further dependence on problematic biases when making referrals.

Conceptual Framework

Humans are never simply one identity, though research and policy often make assumptions to simplify and understand broader problems. In every experience and every educational moment, students (and all people) carry all of who they are with them. To look only at gender or race is to ignore human complexity. Using an intersectional lens (considering multiple identities instead of just one) is crucial in working toward justice in educational spaces

(Crenshaw, 2013). An intersectional framework acknowledges that inequity and marginalization are not results of individual factors but instead stem from the intersections of historical, economic, political, and emotional contexts (Hernández-Saca et al., 2018; Hankivsky et al., 2014). The understanding and study of disability intersectionality and its roots in sociocultural contexts must also include attention to power dynamics, mainly because the experiences of special and general education are qualitatively different for students with diverse identities (Hernández-Saca et al., 2018; Artiles, 2017; Ferri & Connor, 2010).

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework



As shown in Figure 2, the conceptual framework for this study weaves together tenets two, three, five, and seven of Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit; Annamma et al., 2017) with Mockler's Teacher Identity Model (2011). These frameworks lead to a better understanding of

how teachers experience working with students with disabilities. Mockler's framework is used to make sense of teachers' experiences. DisCrit allows an understanding of teacher experience through multiple identities and teachers' role as advocates and activists for their students. Table 2 shows the connection between each DisCrit tenet and the respective elements of the Teacher Identity Model.

Table 2: Tenets of DisCrit and Teacher Identity Model Elements

DisCrit Tenet	Teacher Identity Model Element
2. "DisCrit values multidimensional identities and troubles singular notions of identity such as race or disability or class or gender or sexuality, and so on." (Annamma et al., p. 13)	Personal development and enhanced self-knowledge and capacity for reflection.
3. "DisCrit emphasizes the social constructions of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or disabled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms." (Annamma et al., p. 13)	Professional learning and changes to practice.
5. "DisCrit considers legal and historical aspects of disability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens." (Annamma et al., p. 13)	External political environment and the history and impact of education policy.

7. “DisCrit requires activism and supports all forms of resistance.” (Annamma et al., p. 13)	Teacher activism and greater political engagement (internal and external to the profession).

Intersectionality and Self-Knowledge

Tenet two of DisCrit examines the importance of intersectionality and multiple identities. Like Mockler’s Teacher Identity Model, DisCrit understands that identity is complex and fluid, impacted by many factors, personal, experiential, structural, cultural, and institutional. Tenet two raises the problematic nature of isolating identities into categories that dismiss the nuanced ways all identities are essential to understanding individuals.

In this conceptual framework, tenet two connects directly to the overlap of the external political environment and personal experience, which Mockler defines as personal development. The evolution of personal development can then lead to “enhanced self-knowledge and capacity for reflection” (p. 521). This understanding of self and increased self-reflection correlates with the importance of understanding oneself and positionality concerning structural oppressions as a teacher and individual. In this study, I use these ideas to explore general education teachers' journeys of learning about disability with other minoritized identity markers from their childhood through their current teaching practice.

Social Construction of Race and Ability and Changes to Practice

At the intersection of personal experience and professional context lies professional learning. Mockler (2011) explains that professional learning is crucial to teacher identity and that this learning happens in many contexts. Professional learning can be learning from

colleagues, attending professional development training, or independent research. Improvement of practice and new learning is central to the profession of teaching.

Tenet three of DisCrit elevates the understanding that race and ability are socially constructed, yet there are heavy impacts of being labeled by race or disability. DisCrit emphasizes that these labels set individuals outside of Western ideas of cultural norms. Understanding the significance of labeling students of color and students with disabilities is important to move from professional learning to changes in practice. Teachers cannot change their practices effectively without understanding the impacts of race and ability labels. I draw on these perspectives to explore how general education teachers view race and disability and if/how they consider the intersection of the two.

Disability, Race, and the Political Environment

DisCrit tenet five states that the laws and history of disability and race have been used to oppress individuals of color and individuals with disabilities. This understanding ties directly to Mockler's domain of the external political environment. For teachers to understand how their external political environment influences education, they must also understand the history and impact of education policy. For instance, current political debates around banning books and only teaching white history (Crenshaw, 2023) directly impact students and their education. In Florida, teachers can now face legal action for having certain books in their classrooms (Jaeger et al., 2023; Vissing & Juchniewicz, 2023). The rhetoric around trans people and students as "dangerous" and "immoral" also greatly impacts how trans students are treated and represented in schools (Lewis et al., 2023). Banning books and whitewashing history set a precedent to pick and choose which voices are valued. Effectively, politicians are trying to

silence every marginalized voice and story. As public education is government-funded, politics always has, and will continue to, have huge control over education. The nuances and legacy of the history of race and disability in education run through every school and classroom. In my study, DisCrit tenet five and Mockler's conception of political environment support my analysis of how teachers understand their current political context through historical and legal contexts.

Teacher Activism and Political Engagement

The final tenet of DisCrit, tenet seven, requires activism and resistance. Mockler places teacher activism at the intersection of the external political environment and professional context. Teacher activism is core to both DisCrit and the Teacher Identity Model. Mockler shows that teacher activism can lead to greater political engagement, both within the profession of teaching and outside of it. Mockler posits that activism is crucial to "being" a teacher, which can look like advocacy for students and involvement in professional organizations. Teaching is a political profession, and when examining the intersections of DisCrit and the Teacher Identity Model, tenet seven is central to teacher identity and development. Teacher activism, which can range from unions to what teachers choose to teach, has always been a part of the teaching profession. The quality of public education relies on teacher unions' activism and teachers' willingness to advocate for their students. Teaching is not a neutral profession, and teaching in a public school requires activism almost daily. In my study, I explore how teachers conceptualize their roles as advocates for their students within the public school system.

Professional Learning and Changes to Practice

Finally, the conceptual framework uses DisCrit tenet three to show the connection between general education teachers' professional learning experiences to changes in practice.

Tenet 3 emphasizes the material and psychological impacts of the social construction of race and disability. This includes general education teachers' understanding of disability and the potential shift from exclusionary practices to more inclusive schools.

Summary

More research is needed to understand better how to enable general education teachers to work with students with disabilities. While there are serious issues that perpetuate disproportionality in special education, teachers can play a large role in rectifying the problem. However, general education teachers do not feel prepared or supported in their work with students with disabilities and systemic barriers prevent the necessary preparation and support.

While research addresses preparation programs, there is no known research on how general education teachers experience working with students with disabilities. This study aims to better understand that experience and set up future research and practice opportunities to continue growing teacher capacity and knowledge. An overview of the qualitative approach, using thematic narrative inquiry to understand teacher experiences, is detailed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Methods

This chapter introduces the research methodology for this qualitative thematic narrative inquiry study regarding how general education teachers experience working with students with disabilities. This study looks closely at these teacher experiences and will help identify strategies for teachers to use to better support all students' learning. This thematic narrative approach allows for a deeper understanding of the personal, professional, and environmental factors that impact how general education teachers work with students with disabilities.

Study Purpose

This study investigates how general education teachers in one elementary school in the most diverse school district in Washington state are experiencing working with students with disabilities. The overarching research question is, how do general education teachers experience working with youth with disabilities?

Research Questions

While applying the conceptual framework in Figure 2, this study builds a narrative that answers the following questions:

RQ1: How do teachers' personal and professional experiences shape their understanding of disability throughout their lives?

RQ2: How do general education teachers understand the system of special education and their role within it?

Methodology & Research Design

A qualitative research design was selected to address these questions, as this method is most appropriate when seeking to understand lived experiences in depth (Creswell & Poth,

2016). Within the umbrella of qualitative studies, thematic narrative inquiry was selected as the methodology for this study. Thematic narrative inquiry is a storytelling methodology that uses participants' stories to understand ways of knowing and how people construct the meaning of their experiences (Battacharya, 2017). Thematic narrative inquiry further focuses on identifying themes across stories with an inductive process, allowing themes to emerge from the participants' stories and perspectives. Through thematic narrative inquiry, this study explores the lived experiences of general education teachers through their own storytelling.

In 1990, Clandinin and Connelly published their book *Teachers as Curriculum Planners: Narratives of Experience.* This book is widely credited with the spread of the use of thematic narrative inquiry as a qualitative research method in education. Much as I hope to do in this study, Clandinin and Connelly positioned teachers as experts and professionals who bring valuable perspectives and knowledge to teaching instead of merely curriculum implementers. While Clandinin and Connelly focused on teacher stories about teaching in the classroom, my study focuses on teacher stories concerning disability throughout their lives. Thematic narrative inquiry as a research methodology honors the stories of teachers, which is ultimately what this study aims to do.

Researcher Positionality Statement

I came to this work trained as a multiple-subjects general education teacher from Mills College in Oakland, California. My program was steeped in social justice pedagogy, from how to teach math in a culturally responsive way to yearlong seminars examining our identities as teacher candidates. When I entered the classroom, I thought I was ready to teach all my students, but I was not.

I started teaching kindergarten in an urban school district in the Bay Area of California. Students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) were not only placed in a separate classroom but in an entirely separate school building from general education classrooms. In that first year, I had two students in my class with autism. I had absolutely no idea how to support them and, on the advice of more veteran teachers, advocated for one of them to be moved to the isolated special education program. After several months, he was moved, and my classroom felt less chaotic, if a little empty.

Two years into my teaching career, I moved schools to teach kindergarten in Berkeley, California. Berkeley Unified School District has been a full-inclusion district since the early 1990s. There are no isolated special education settings. Instead, special education teachers serve as case managers and teammates with all classroom teachers. I was immediately struck by how Berkeley USD teachers talked about students. At no point did language about removing a child from a classroom enter the conversation, even in the most challenging situations. Instead, the conversations focused on supporting the teacher and student and adapting the school setting to work for the child. A third of my class had IEPs or other forms of special education support, and I had support from experienced special education teachers to figure out how to connect with each one. I spent the next two years at Berkeley USD, continuously impressed by how different the school culture felt from my first job.

Due to my second teaching experience, I am strongly biased toward inclusive education in most situations. I assume every teacher can (and should want to) teach all kids, regardless of need. I also understand that many teachers feel unprepared to teach kids who don’t fit the

societally determined "normal" box. I have found myself impatient with teacher preparation programs that don't spend ample time on how to work with neurodiverse kids.

For the past six years, I have been in training to become a school psychologist. My understanding of students with disabilities and the special education system has grown vastly. I now have a dual identity as both a general education teacher and a school psychologist, which gives me a multifaceted perspective on what general education teachers grapple with. I see this piece of my identity as crucial to this study.

As a white woman, I have always had comfortable access to educational spaces. I see that power as a responsibility to challenge and push other white teachers to value and support marginalized students. I know my participants are all teachers committed to educational justice, yet none had any training in working with neurodiverse populations in graduate school. Not all of my participants have taught in an inclusive setting, but all have worked with neurodiverse students and students with disabilities. I also hope that they trust me enough to be vulnerable in sharing their training and teaching experiences.

I hope my role as a researcher felt collaborative and curious. I wanted to ask open-ended questions that have come up from my experience and leave space for the teachers' stories. I have not been a classroom teacher in four years, while my participants were all classroom teachers through the remote learning years of COVID. Most importantly, I know that there are many things I don't know about myself, my participants, and this project, and I will push myself to continuously reflect.

Sample

Setting

According to US News and World Report (2020), the district selected for this study served 21,700 students, 80% of whom were students of color. Families spoke 104 different languages in the district. 46.4% of students in the district were considered “socioeconomically disadvantaged.” 15.2% of students received special education services, slightly higher than the national average of 14.3%. 100% of teachers in the district were credentialed to teach in Washington state, and 91.4% had more than three years of teaching experience. This district was selected due to the racial and socioeconomic diversity and the percentage of students receiving special education services.

In this district, special education services usually occur outside the general education classroom. There were several isolated settings where students were placed based on their determined needs. Most schools also had a resource room run by a special education teacher who provided small-group academic interventions to students with IEPs. District leadership stated that they hoped to move schools toward a more inclusive special education model but plans for this movement had not yet been determined.

This study occurred in an elementary school in a public school district in the Seattle metro area. The most recent data available on the school from the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction was from the 2021-2022 school year unless otherwise noted. Data was not available from the district itself. There were 354 students enrolled in the 2022-2023 school year, and 72.7% of students regularly attended school, measured by the number of students with an average of fewer than two absences per month. 49.7% of the

student body were listed as female, and 50.3% were identified as male. 15.0% of students were Asian, 18.9% were Black, 24.3% were Hispanic/Latino, 0.8% were American Indian/Alaskan Native, 6.8% were Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, 13.6% were two or more races, and 20.6% were white. 20.9% of students enrolled were English Language Learners, and 62.7% were low-income students. 18.9% of students are identified as having at least one disability.

At the time of the study, there were 26 classroom teachers in the school teaching grades K-5, and the average number of years of teaching experience among the teachers was 12.1. 88.5% of teachers were female, and 11.5% were male. On the OSPI website, three teachers (11.5%) were listed as Asian; three (11.5%) were listed as Black, and 20 (76.9%) were listed as white. However, a review of the school's teaching roster over the last five years shows that no Black teachers have been employed since at least 2018. 73.1% of teachers were general education teachers, 23.1% were special education teachers, 3.8% were teachers in the transitional bilingual instructional program, and 11.5% were listed as “other.”

The district strategic plan, last updated in December 2021, cites several goals related to special education. The district plan states that “by 2024, there will be no disproportionality evident in student discipline data.” Discipline disproportionality contributes to students of color and special education students being put in isolated settings. The plan also says that an area of focused improvement is “increasing the percentage of scholars participating in at least 90% of classroom instructional time.” This goal implies a focus on inclusion, cited as a core focus of Washington State public schools.

In understanding teacher interviews, it is important to know how this district has its special education services set up in elementary schools. Table 3 below shows the three types of programs within the district. They are listed from least restrictive to most restrictive.

Table 3: District Special Education Programs

Program Name and Acronym	Description of Program
Resource Support Program (RSP)	- Provides support for students who are in a general education classroom and receive pullout or push in services for academic and social emotional IEP goals
Academic Core Program (ACP)	- Self-contained classroom, some students spend a small amount of time in general education classrooms. - Serves students who have academic and social emotional IEP goals
Functional Core Program (FCP)	- Self-contained classroom - Serves students who have functional life skills IEP goals, like toileting, washing hands, safety skills, or using communicative devices

Participants

Participant selection was made through the lens of purposeful sampling using the Homogeneity strategy (Palinkas et al., 2013). This approach aimed to explore a particular group in-depth and understand participants' experiences with several common characteristics. The

four teachers selected for this study were credentialed teachers. They all taught at the same elementary school and taught kindergarten or 1st grade, meaning their environmental and political context is similar. They have all been at the school for at least two years. However, they varied in personal and professional experiences. One of the teachers was Filipino, and the other three were white. The four teachers attended different teacher preparation programs.

I selected kindergarten and 1st grade teachers for several reasons. Often, students in kindergarten or 1st grade do not have IEPs and have not been identified as having a disability yet. Kindergarten and 1st grade are also crucial developmental years for early intervention, with several intensive academic intervention programs designed to target those grades. My professional experience is primarily as a general education kindergarten teacher, which allowed me to analyze my participants' experiences more thoughtfully. I selected teachers who had spent at least two years collaborating because I wanted to understand how members of a close-knit team's experiences were different or similar to one another. I partnered with a former colleague and current school psychologist to identify and recruit this team of teachers.

No participant was previously directly connected with the researcher and did not represent a conflict of interest. The researcher completed a year-long school psychology internship during the 2020-2021 school year in the same district where potential participants work but did not interact with any participants.

Data Collection

Individual Interviews

This study aimed to build a deep understanding of the experiences of a small number of teachers. Qualitative interviews allowed me to engage in purposeful conversations with these

teachers to probe and understand their experiences and perspectives (Bhattacharya, 2017). The interviews were formal and semi-structured with clusters of questions (Bhattacharya). The interview protocol (see Appendix A) had four sections of interview questions that aligned with each section of the conceptual framework. The questions were designed to elicit rich stories and personal experiences from each participant, leading to a better understanding of the obstacles and strategies teachers used to support students' learning.

Data collection for this study was completed through individual interviews found in Appendix A. In qualitative research, individual interviews are a core method of data collection (Creswell, 2007; Deterding & Waters, 2018). I used analytic memos after each interview to document my thoughts. After each interview, I spent 15 minutes writing notes on my reflections. Interviews were conducted via Zoom recording software. The interview protocol was divided into four sections, beginning with personal experiences and moving into questions about professional ones. The interview concluded with the question, "How do you define student success?" This invited participants to reflect on their broader motivations and give insight into their ultimate goals as teachers. Interviews did not begin until participants had confirmed written and verbal consent to participate in the study. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

Procedure. Before any contact with participants, the proposal for this study was approved by my dissertation committee. Then, IRB approval was granted through the University of Washington. Once approval was given, participants were contacted via email and asked to participate in the study. Scheduling the interviews occurred via text message. Before recording,

an informed consent form (Appendix B) was presented and read to each participant. Each participant consented to the study verbally and in writing.

The interview was separated into four sections, each connected Teacher Identity Model (Mockler, 2011) element, Teacher Action, and DisCrit Tenet (Annamma, 2013). Table 4 shows the structure of the interview guide, while Appendix A includes the complete interview protocol.

Table 4: Interview Guide Structure

Teacher Identity Element	Teacher Action	DisCrit Tenet
Personal Development	Enhanced Self-Knowledge and capacity for Reflection	Tenet 2: multidimensional notions of identity
External Political Environment	History and Impact of Education Policy	Tenet 5: historical and legal legacy of racism and ableism
Professional Learning	Changes to Practice	Tenet 3: Material and psychological impacts of the social construction of race and ability
Teacher Activism	Greater political engagement (internal and external to the profession)	Tenet 7: requires activism and supports all forms of resistance

Within each of the four interview sections, I asked teachers questions that centered around their own perspectives and experiences. Often, teachers would respond to a question

with a story that would illicit a further follow-up question to gather more information about the participant's experience. I asked clarifying questions when more information was needed.

I engaged in memo writing throughout the study immediately after each interview and throughout the coding and analysis process (Battacharya, 2017). Memo writing is useful in helping the researcher separate their thoughts from the theory and the interviewer's statements (Birks & Mills, 2011). The content of these memos ranged from striking phrases, connections to other participants' interviews, connections to literature, concerns, and further questions.

Data Analysis

In my coding process, I primarily used Bhattacharya's 2017 work *Fundamentals of Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide* and Saldana's *Coding Manual for Qualitative Research* (2009) as guides. Bhattacharya's work informed my conceptualization of my codes and interviews, while Saldana's manual provided the five-step outline for my coding process. Interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai, a transcription software, and coded using a thematic analysis approach in Atlas.ti. A thematic analysis allowed me to deeply explore a data set, identify patterns and themes, and create a narrative (Bhattacharya, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2012). A thematic analysis approach is iterative, I coded and analyzed each interview several times, first identifying descriptive and then sorting those codes into meaningful themes. These themes contributed to the overall analysis and understanding of the data.

First Cycle Coding: Descriptive Coding

The interviews were initially coded for patterns and commonalities between teachers' experiences. I used descriptive coding in my first cycle of coding (Huberman, 1994; Saldana,

2003; Wolcott, 1994). Descriptive coding is designed to answer general questions and helps develop a common vocabulary for the data. Wolcott describes descriptive coding as the "foundation for qualitative inquiry." Descriptive coding leads to categories (Wolcott, 1994), which become the foundation for second cycle coding. In this cycle, I defined a pattern as when three of the four teachers mentioned a topic.

Second Cycle Coding: Pattern Coding

For my second cycle coding, I aimed to develop major themes that correlated with my research questions using the descriptive codes from my first cycle (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This method, called pattern coding, allows the researcher to organize the codes from the first cycle and assign meaning to that organization (Saldana, 2009). Pattern coding can be a way of finding larger themes that the descriptive codes fit into. Once I identified themes and sub-themes, I did a frequency count to ensure the trustworthiness of how often the themes appeared in each interview.

During this cycle, I constructed statements that captured combinations of descriptive codes. This coding process was, again, iterative, and interviews were reanalyzed several times to hone the pattern codes and definitions.

Trustworthiness of the Data

Credibility of the Study

In qualitative research, credibility is incredibly important (Connelly, 2016). Credibility refers to the accuracy with which the study captures and conveys the experiences of the research participants. Before beginning my data collection, I solicited feedback on my interview protocol from seasoned qualitative researchers and colleagues conducting their own qualitative

research projects. In establishing the credibility of this study, I engaged in conversations with colleagues, debriefed with experts in the field, journaled reflectively, and did member checks (Hammarberg et al., 2016, Connelly, 2016).

Memo Writing. Throughout my many cycles of coding, I engaged in the practice of writing analytic memos. Analytic memos are synonymous with journal entries to track the researcher's thought process throughout the analysis process (Saldana, 2009). Memo writing is crucial to critical reflection throughout the data collection and coding. They allow the researcher to challenge their assumptions and build the relationship between the interview transcripts and making meaning.

My analytic memos were written when I was struck with a new thought or noticed a particularly interesting pattern. My longer reflective memos were written in Word, while I wrote words and phrases on Post-its and scraps of paper. For instance, I wrote the word “luck” on a piece of paper. After each coding round, I spent at least 10 minutes freewriting my thoughts and impressions. Engaging in writing analytic memos greatly enriched my analysis and deepened my understanding of my participants' experiences. Memo writing also helped me separate my interpretations of my participants’ experiences from their stories.

Dependability of the Researcher

To ensure dependability, I kept organized documentation of my research process. I engaged in dialogue with colleagues to ensure I followed a procedure that made sense to other researchers. For a study to have strong dependability, it must be clearly outlined and detailed so that another researcher can replicate it (Connelly, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The

conversations with my colleagues allowed me to clarify my notes in a detailed way, and they were able to point out procedures that may have otherwise been hard to follow.

Member Checks

To have an ethical, trustworthy study, I did member checks with the participants and experts in the field. Member checks consist of presenting findings to the study participants to ensure they agree with how their experiences are represented (Bhattacharya, 2017). My member checks were completed after the findings chapter of this project was drafted, and participants were able to give feedback to the researcher. While the participants declined to engage in member checks, several general education and special education experts and general education and special education teachers provided feedback and insight.

Summary

This chapter detailed the research methodology, data collection, and analysis procedures. Chapter three sets the stage for the following findings and discussion. In chapter four, the results from the interviews will be presented and are organized by research question and theme.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter focuses on the content and findings of the interviews. Using the methodology of thematic narrative inquiry (Battacharya, 2017), this chapter is organized with the themes that emerged in the participant interviews. Their stories are woven together throughout this chapter, using their lived experiences to illuminate broader similarities and differences. Much of this chapter is the participants' own words, as thematic narrative inquiry hinges on centering the participants.

Across the study, participants highlighted many frustrations and challenges facing their work within their current political and professional context. They cited a lack of communication, unpreparedness, and systemic pressure as primary difficulties. However, they also shared stories of deep relationships and many examples of their activism. The teachers in this study cared tremendously about the success of their students, which is illustrated in their passionate advocacy for their students and their continued perseverance in a broken system.

Data Analysis Results

Descriptive Coding Results

The first cycle of coding used verbatim quotes to create broad descriptive categories. Table 5 shows some examples of descriptive category codes that emerged in the first cycle of coding and corresponding quotes.

Table 5: First Cycle Descriptive Coding Categories

Descriptive Category	Participant Quote
Relationships	“So my earliest memories of students with significant disabilities were me trying to help them and me wanting to play with those kids and help their room.”
Communication challenges	”I used to want to help to push them on the swings and help play with them and things like that.”
“Luck”	”Um, so I was really lucky.” “But that was luck of the person. Not necessarily my program like seeking her out, or anything like that.” “Oh, you got less lucky with your mentor teacher, not know how to help you with things or whatever it is.”
Individual student needs	“And so we learned a lot of like, okay, that kid over there who is losing their marbles. I don't know how to fix it at the moment, but you know, it's like, okay, getting in their face and yelling at them is not going to solve the problem.” “But I don't think about like were other kiddos like they've lost a parent when they were very young, or they've been in homeless if you know like that kind of stuff. But even just

	those experiences, and they can even be like small traumas, like stuff that you don't think about as trauma. But I so I think that that should be a piece of teacher education programs, because it is really important. And it's, it's important for us to understand these little especially like me, these little people come to us, we don't know what home was like for them."
Approaches to referral process	"And I feel like they're trying to least like from what I'm hearing is they're trying to put kids, a lot of kids back into gen ed, and with resource rooms support, which is, granted, is the least restrictive environment but not always what the kiddo needs." "I have two other kiddos this year who I would like to refer, but they'll tell me their absences are too high."

Note: These are only a few examples of descriptive codes from First Cycle Coding.

Within this first cycle of coding, two specific phrases emerged repeatedly. The word "luck" or "lucky" appeared ten times when teachers talked about their formative experiences and influential relationships. The language of "fighting" for student services appeared 13 times when teachers discussed navigating the referral process. The significance of these codes is discussed later in this chapter.

Pattern Coding Results

Once descriptive categories were identified in the first cycle of coding, I moved to the second cycle of coding. In the second cycle, I organized the descriptive categories into well-defined themes. Table 6 shows my Second Cycle pattern coding. The four themes that emerged set the structure for the remainder of chapter four.

Table 6: Second Cycle Themes and Definitions

Theme	Definition	Sample Participant Quotes
Influential Relationships	When a participant talks about how another person (student, teacher, family member) has had a significant impact on how they see disability	"My parents were pretty like, you should, we treat everybody with kindness, be respectful, like nothing derogatory towards people with disabilities." "I was really lucky that I had someone who had that experience and was able to like help me understand how to support students with differing needs."
District Pressure and Policy Around Inclusion	When a teacher mentions overevaluation, disproportionality, policy or district pressure, or the	"There's definitely this shift. To me, it feels like in the last couple of years, but I could be wrong of like, inclusion as much as possible over excluding students. Which I totally agree with. There are certain scenarios

	impact of inclusion on teachers and students	though, like, where there are students where I'm like, I also don't think that those students needs are being met." "They're redefining success as being in like, what being in the general education classroom at any cost, and it's really harmful to those kids in the best because like, if a kid can't handle being in a room with 20, other loud kindergarteners, that doesn't mean that they're a bad kid, it doesn't mean that they're not successful, it means they need something different." "They don't want everybody to just get dumped into special ed. It's not, not my hope and my goal, but can we make it a reasonable timeframe for looking at kids?"
Navigating School Systems and Special	When a teacher discusses how they approach addressing initial concerns about students or confusion	"If I did have a concern about like, a developmental delay or something that or behaviorally, I would talk to the parents first and be like, Hey, this is kind of what I'm

Education Processes	about the special education process	noticing, are you noticing the same thing at home? If it's a concern to you, like it might be worth it to check out with your doctor, sort of like putting it on the parents in that way." "Because I didn't understand like, I knew I was supposed to, like, fill out this form and take all this data, but I didn't understand what they were going to do with it." "I don't even know what the qualifying model is anymore." "It's so hard because the, the feeling and the narrative that is being said to me as a gen ed teacher is you're not doing enough."
Teacher Responsibility	When a teacher describes fighting to get services for a student or ways in which they have differentiated their teaching for a student	"I have found that a lot of times I am making, like as much as it is collaborative, when they have like a diagnosed disability and like on an IEP, it's still like ultimately up to me to be making these decisions and

	seeing what's going on with them and like seeing what help they need and advocating for them."
	"Okay, I have done everything that I possibly can do. I actually went to the union because they didn't feel like they were doing anything like."
	"I'm making those changes to be effective for my kids, because the curriculum is not meant for kids with disabilities. It is not meant for a lot of kids in general, but it's certainly not meant for kids with disabilities."

Once I had defined four broad themes (influential relationships, district pressure and policy, navigating school systems, and teacher activism), I identified more specific patterns within each theme and connected the themes to my research questions. Table 7 shows the connection of each research question to the broad themes and the sub-themes.

Table 7: Research Questions and Themes

RQ	Broad Themes	Sub Themes
How do teachers' personal and professional experiences shape their understanding of disability throughout their lives?	Influential Relationships	- Three types of relationships - Element of luck
How do gen ed teachers understand the system of special education and their role within it?	District Pressure and Policy	- Systemic and structural challenges - Placement and LRE
	Navigating School Systems	- Process confusion - Conceptualizing referral process - Feeling unprepared
	Teacher Activism	- Fighting for services - Differentiation - Teacher of Color - Going above and beyond

After I had connected the themes to sub-themes and research questions, I did a trustworthiness check to ensure that I was not over- or under-assigning meaning to each theme. This check was a frequency count of how often each theme appeared within the four

transcripts. Table 7 shows the frequency with which each theme appeared in the four teacher interviews. The bolded themes are the overarching themes that tie to the research questions, and the sub-themes are listed below each heading. The analysis section is organized based on Table 8.

Table 8: Theme Frequency Count

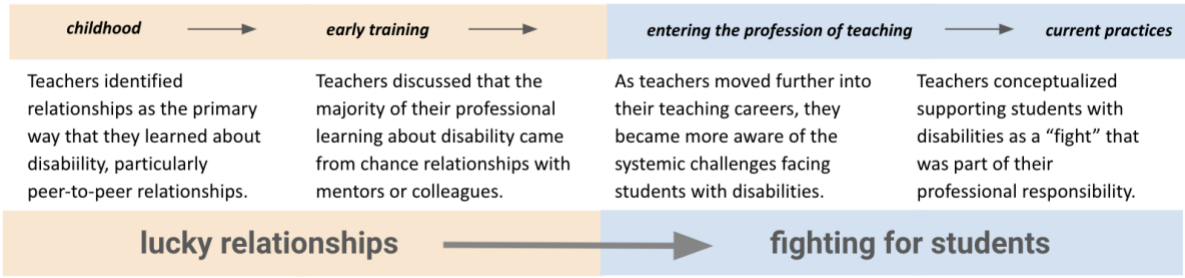
Theme	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C	Teacher D	Total
Influential Relationships					
Types of Relationships	1	0	4	3	8
"lucky"	1	2	0	2	5
District policy and pressure					
Overevaluation and Disproportionality	1	1	2	1	5
Policy Pressure	1	0	1	3	5
Impact on Teachers and Students	2	0	1	5	8
Navigating school systems					
Addressing Initial Concerns	1	3	1	3	8
Confusion	1	1	4	1	7
Teacher Activism					
"Fighting" for Services	0	3	1	6	10
Differentiation	0	2	1	3	6
Going Above and Beyond	0	3	2	4	9

Note. Number of times the theme was mentioned.

Of note, the most frequent theme that appeared was the idea of "fighting" for services, even though only three of the teachers discussed it. The types of relationships, their impact on teachers and students, and the need to address initial concerns were also frequently discussed. Seeing the patterns across which teachers discussed which themes helped me create a deeper understanding of the findings.

Through my cycles of analysis, I discovered that each teacher experienced commonalities in their journeys in learning about disability. As I unpacked their stories, it became clear that from childhood to current practices, teachers spoke with gratitude and passion about their experiences. All four teachers described relationships that developed their understanding and commitment to disability justice, and that commitment then led to teachers fiercely fighting for students within the public school system. Figure 3 illustrates this journey, beginning in childhood and early training, where teachers described "lucky relationships" that deeply impacted them. The second part of their journeys, "fighting for students," began as they entered the profession of teaching and led to their current pedagogy and practices. The rest of the chapter is organized in the same structure as this timeline.

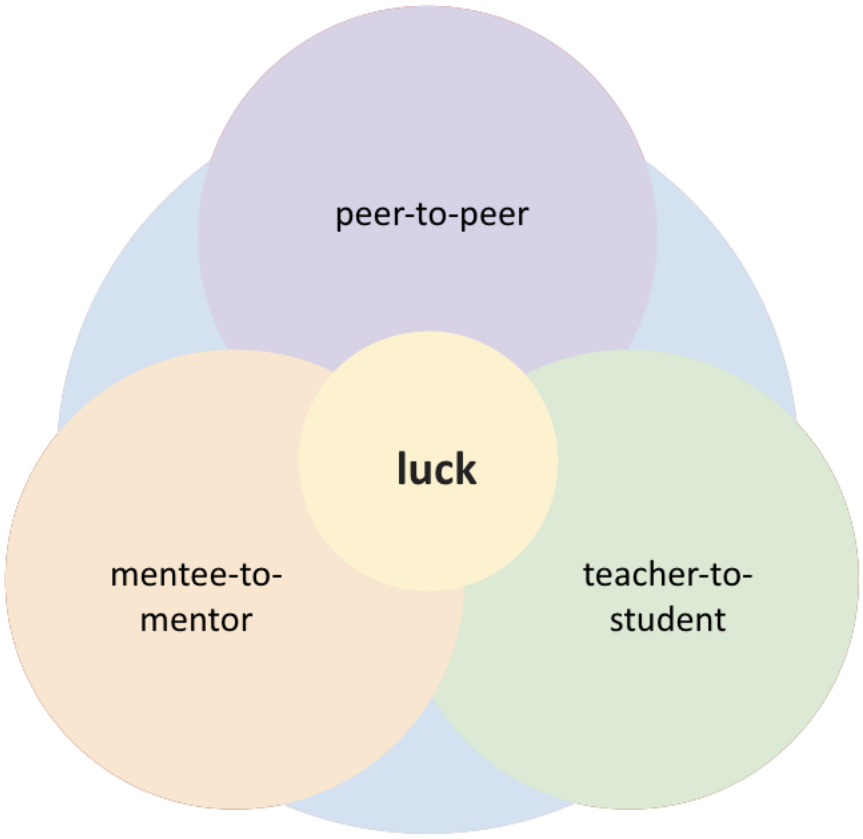
Figure 3: Teacher Journey Timeline



Teacher Journey Part 1: Lucky Relationships

Every participant in this study noted multiple interpersonal relationships across their lifetimes that were crucial to developing their nuanced understanding of disability. Some of these relationships were from their K-12 experience, while others were from their professional learning. Figure 4 shows the types of relationships that teachers discussed, all of which they described as "lucky."

Figure 4: Types of Lucky Relationships



Types of Relationships

Teachers described three general types of relationships: peer-to-peer, mentee-to-mentor, and teacher-to-student. In peer-to-peer relationships, teachers shared about friendships that changed their understanding of disability. Teacher C shared about a friendship in college that enhanced her self-knowledge and capacity for reflection. Teacher C stated that because she didn't grow up in the US education system, she had no exposure to disability or special education until she came to college. She described this friendship as a pivotal relationship in her learning.

> And when I was in freshman, I actually had a friend who has cerebral palsy. And so she has cerebral palsy. And at that time, I didn't see her disability, her cerebral palsy, because, again, I wasn't taught and so she actually taught me a lot of things. (C)

Teacher C's peer relationship with this friend in college illustrates how she was able to learn from a friend with a disability. Because this was her first interpersonal relationship with a person with a disability, it was the foundation for her understanding of disability. She expressed that her friend talked to her about her experience with cerebral palsy. This friendship also allowed Teacher C to move past the singular notion of disability and understand that her friend held many equally important identities.

Unlike Teacher C, Teacher D's first peer-to-peer experience with disability was when she was growing up. Teacher D's first memories of interacting with students with disabilities were less intimate than Teacher C's. Teacher D shared a peer-to-peer relationship in elementary school that was her first memory of learning about disability. In her experience, she talked about the segregation of students with disability and seeing them as needing help.

> But when I lived in Indiana which was k-4 [kindergarten through 4th grade], I remember going over and helping in their class and wanting to be involved in their room and

> wanting to be a helper and things like that. And trying to like, I would go, I have memories of they would play over on the playground on the swings with their, what I now know would have been their paraeducator, but for me it was a teacher. I used to want to help to push them on the swings and help play with them and things like that. So my earliest memories of students with significant disabilities were me trying to help them and me wanting to play with those kids and help in their room. (D)

Teacher D's learning from her peer-to-peer relationship reinforced the notion that children with disabilities needed help in a segregated setting. In this experience, Teacher D saw the systemic segregation of students with disabilities in schools as this group was relegated to a separate classroom. This also reiterated the problem of disability as an identity that overshadows any other identity.

Element of Luck

The second relationship dynamic teachers described were "lucky" relationships they had early in their careers with mentor teachers. Using the term "lucky," teachers illustrated that their teacher preparation programs had not intentionally trained them to work with students with disabilities. The idea that there is an element of chance for new teachers to learn how to support students with disabilities further emphasizes the lack of value education systems place on supporting students with disabilities. Teacher D described her relationship with her mentor teacher as a student teacher.

> I also got really lucky with my student teaching experience that my mentor teacher was originally a special education teacher and then taught kindergarten. And so while I don't necessarily agree with everything that like she taught me now that I like know more. I was really lucky that I had someone who had that experience and was able to like help me understand how to support students with differing needs. (D)

Teacher D's experience shows that her proximity to a teacher with special education training increased her understanding of supporting students with disabilities in a classroom setting. With the knowledge of a veteran teacher with a background in special and general

education, Teacher D could see the general education classroom through a special education lens, broadening her understanding of the whole school system.

Teacher A shared a similar experience of partnering with a more experienced special education teacher in her first year due to the physical proximity of their classrooms. She explained that she felt supported by the other teacher's willingness to reach out and help her. When Teacher A had a student struggling behaviorally or academically, she would first ask the veteran teacher if she had any suggestions. Teacher A explained that many systems and structures that she used in her classroom (e.g., "check in, check out" and visual schedules) were those that she learned from her inadvertent teacher mentor.

> Um, so I was really lucky. My first year, the, the teacher next to me was our kindergarten ACP teacher. And at my school, she really was probably like, the first person to welcome me and like, see if I needed anything. And so I felt like I had a teammate and someone who had different expertise that I definitely, especially not as a first year teacher didn't have. (A)

Teacher A learned how to differentiate for her students, expanding her understanding of supporting students with disabilities in her general education classroom. She spent time with a special education teacher and students, contributing to her asset-based lens of disability. This mentor relationship allowed her to build skills, strategies, and knowledge to improve her teaching of all students.

Teachers shared about students whose negative experiences expanded their understanding of the special education institution. Teachers discussed seeing students negatively impacted by the lack of services or exclusionary discipline. This type of experience has been documented in other literature, like the Giangreco et al. (1993) study that found that

when students with severe disabilities were included in their classes, 17 out of 19 teachers reported increased comfort and “transformative” experiences for themselves.

Teacher C shared an experience from her time as a YMCA counselor before she entered her teacher training program.

> I saw this kindergartener, who is a Black student, already getting suspended, because he is labeled as violent, and rude and behavior and all that he was suspended one week, the school started. And I was infuriated for the family, for him and for And I was infuriated for the family, for him and for everything. And so I told myself, I need to be in education. (C)

Teacher C’s student illustrates the complex relationship between race, gender, and ability status. She witnessed a student who held multiple marginalized identities experiencing exclusionary discipline and felt anger on his behalf. This experience was a catalyst for her career in teaching.

Teacher D described a student from her first year of teaching who had a lasting impact on her. She shared her commitment to figuring out what worked for him and trying to do as much in her classroom as possible to support his learning and social-emotional development. Despite her efforts, she shared that nothing she did was enough.

> But I still remember the day that he was sitting on a table crying and saying he was the bad kid. And like I like I have been very intentionally careful about my language, since he like, I hadn’t told him that. But he had figured it out. Like he had figured that conclusion out on his own. Because you hear enough people talking about you. (D)

Teacher D’s story shows the negative self-perception that many students with disabilities internalize due to systemic biases and oppressive practices. While Teacher D worked to support this student’s positive self-image and relationship with learning, he still received messages that he was “bad” or “other.” Teacher D expressed her frustration that, despite her efforts to create a

classroom that supported all of her students, she could not remove the stigma projected onto this student.

Taken together, learning about disability occurred at different developmental points for each teacher. For the teachers who interacted with students with disabilities in elementary or middle school, a disability was seen as something that required "help." For those with more impactful experiences in college and teaching, there was a deeper understanding of disability as they could engage in conversation and reflection. What is notable from each teacher's story is that almost all their learning about disability was inadvertent and circumstantial. The word "luck" also indicated that teachers wanted to learn about disability and that learning through relationships was a positive experience. Teachers appeared grateful for these relational learning opportunities.

These relationships deeply impacted each teacher, and it was clear that those relationships led the teachers to a commitment to disability justice. As they entered the teaching profession and began to develop their identities as teachers, that sense of duty became a passionate commitment to their students.

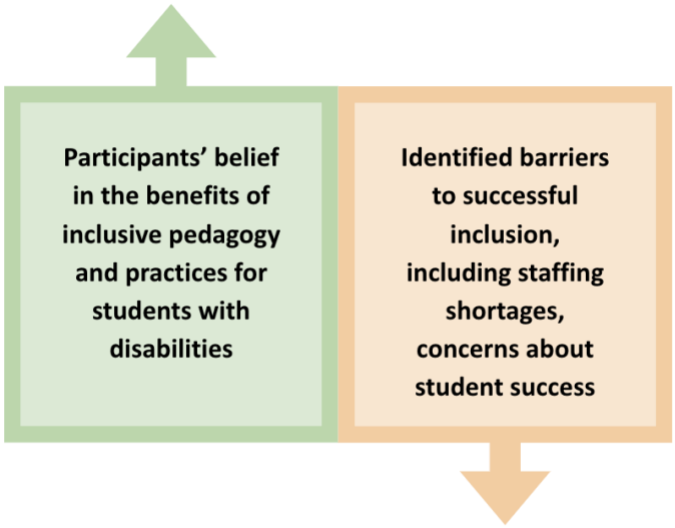
Teacher Journey Part 2: Fighting for Students

All four teachers in this study saw the system of special education and public school as unfair to their students with disabilities. They spoke about budget cuts and dwindling resources, a drain they all felt on their classrooms. They agreed with the statewide push for inclusive practices but questioned the feasibility of such policies. Each teacher also expressed the desire to advocate for their students with disabilities but when they shared the approaches they take to doing so, they vastly differed.

District Pressure and Policy Around Inclusion

All four participants cited district and school administration policy pressure around inclusion. Washington State has made inclusion a priority for schools, and the four teachers in this study made sense of that priority in two main ways. First, teachers spoke to the messages they received from the district, school administration, and school psychologists about over-evaluation and disproportionality and how those messages made seeking support for struggling students complex and emotional. Second, teachers discussed the impact of this pressure to avoid referring students for special education evaluations on their students and themselves. Figure 5 shows the conflict between teachers' beliefs about inclusion and the actual feasibility of carrying out successful inclusion in their classrooms. The complexity of inclusion implementation is such that while teachers agree that students spending as much time as possible in general education is theoretically a positive thing, there are many barriers to successful inclusion practices.

Figure 5: Dialectic Challenge of Inclusion Practices



Placement and Least Restrictive Environment. When discussing the impact of these policy pressures, teachers all referenced the district leadership's push to keep students in general education settings. Each teacher spoke about the message they had received from the district and how they saw it playing out in their school. This was one of the areas in which all four teachers shared an almost identical understanding of the district's goals and concerns.

Teacher A talked about the push she has noticed toward including all students in general education classrooms and the complexity of that initiative.

> I, there's, there's definitely this shift [towards inclusion in general education classrooms]. To me, it feels like in the last couple of years, but I could be wrong of like, inclusion as much as possible over excluding students. Which I totally agree with. There are certain scenarios though, like, where there are students where I'm like, I also don't think that those students needs are being met by being pushed into and not even like, students in an ACP class that I think would do well in a functional core class [FCP]. And the ACP teacher being like, I am, like, trying all these things, like I, I would need another body in here, like another one on one. And it just doesn't seem like it's supporting that student or the rest of the students. Um, so definitely, like a case by case basis, like, there are plenty of situations that students should be in a general education class, and they thrive there. (A)

Teacher A notes that she agreed with the pedagogy behind inclusion but said that the current system didn't necessarily work for all students. She stressed the importance of considering each child and how they could be most successful. She also made note of special education teachers feeling overwhelmed by the lack of staffing and adult support they had in their classrooms. Teacher A also mentioned something not included in formal documentation, which is how a student may impact the rest of their classroom.

Teacher B echoed Teacher A's understanding of district-level priorities around placement, as well as her sentiment about the complexity of placement decisions and the importance of understanding each child's needs.

> And I feel like they're trying to least like from what I'm hearing is they're trying to put kids, a lot of kids back into gen ed, and with resource rooms support, which is, which is granted is the least restrictive environment, but not always what the kiddo needs. And I feel like a lot of kiddos who qualify for special education supports need a smaller environment, a large classroom with lots of other kids, and not being able to get quick and easy. (B)

Teacher B spoke to the legal element of placing a student in the Least Restrictive Environment but noted that general education is not necessarily the best fit. She also discussed the need for many students to be in a smaller environment, which is impossible in general education classrooms in public schools. This challenge with class size speaks to the lack of funding for all public education programs.

Teacher C agreed with Teacher A and Teacher B, particularly around her understanding of the priorities of the district and the need for smaller class sizes.

> The district is pushing that every student should be in a gen ed classroom, which I don't think is the like, I don't think is equitable. I know we want to focus on inclusivity. However, there are some students that cannot, their environment of learning really to be in a smaller class size. And in an environment where they can have a teacher that is specialized in special education. (C)

Finally, Teacher D provided more insight into how the district is redefining success for students. She identified the harm that she sees in this binary approach.

> They're [the district leadership] redefining success as being in like, what being in the general education classroom at any cost, and it's really harmful to those kids in the best because like, if a kid can't handle being in a room with 20, other loud kindergarteners, that doesn't mean that they're a bad kid, it doesn't mean that they're not successful, it means they need something different…. Yes, we do want everyone to be included. But what the least and like, what is it the least restrictive environment? Like if you have a one-on-one adult following you around? That's not least restrictive. That's like, you're okay, you're in the other room, but you're screaming everyday because you're overwhelmed. Like, is that restrictive? Or is that just harmful? (D)

All four teachers mentioned the clear push from the district to keep students in general education classrooms, and they pointed out the complexity and challenge of putting that idea into practice. They also questioned the equity of forcing students to stay in general education classrooms to the detriment of the student. Teachers cited concerns about class sizes and how LRE is defined for each student. They also expressed concern and caring for their students, all referencing the importance of figuring out the best possible placement for their students. Teachers stated agreement with the philosophy of inclusion but noted that the current school structure was unable to successfully serve students when inclusion was defined as being in a general education classroom.

Systemic Challenges with Inclusion. The teachers in this study discussed the impact of a lack of funding and staff on the district and their schools.

> Something that has been really frustrating lately is they closed a lot of those [special education] classrooms, and then just kind of shoved kids all together. And that, and like, are trying to really push for like students to be moved into general education and like, without really like thinking about the ramifications for teachers that already don't have training, like I'm not special education trained. I don't have training. I'm doing my best for my kids…. They're cutting special education teachers, they're trying to put students that do better in a self contained classroom and like, just are going to be a lot more successful in that classroom. They're redefining success as being in like, what being in the general education classroom at any cost, and it's really harmful to those kids in the best because like, if a kid can't handle being in a room with 20, other loud kindergarteners, that doesn't mean that they're a bad kid, it doesn't mean that they're not successful, it means they need something different. (D)

Teacher D named the lack of intentionality with which staffing and resource decisions were made. She talked about the literal lack of physical space for special education classrooms, leading students to transition into general education classrooms without much thought or planning. Placing students in general education classrooms without appropriate planning or

differentiation harms teachers' abilities to support their most vulnerable students. Teacher D also spoke about the disrespect she feels these changes have on special education teachers.

> And we have amazing teachers that do self-contained classrooms, and we should be respecting them. Because like, we're it's like, okay, we're just gonna close it. Like our district has closed a bunch of self-contained classrooms. And it's just like, putting all of the kids that should have been in smaller self-contained classrooms into one self-contained classroom and then getting mad when behaviors are higher and then like getting upset when there's incident reports and then trying to get those teachers to like, push kids into general education when they're not ready for general education. (D)

She named the importance of students being ready for general education. While she agreed that the current system was not ideal, she felt dismayed at how her district tried to rectify the problem. She felt it was disrespectful to teachers and problematic for students. Specifically, she mentioned class size and setting as a primary problem.

Teacher C agreed. She discussed the staffing shortage and one way the district is attempting to solve the problem.

> And so there's a lot of classrooms right now that don't even have a special education specialized teacher and some of them are having a hard time still fulfilling that. And that's why our superintendent is doing this incentive of tier three kind of where she will pay for teachers to get their certification. And we'll provide like scholarship because the need for special education that is special special ed teachers are like super high demand. And so she like just sent out actually on Wednesday that she's doing that but it's only specifically for teachers who want to be in special education. Okay, but that kind of still weird because she's doing that and her office is closing a lot of classrooms. So it's kinda like the contradiction. (C)

Teacher C's confusion about the contradictions she sees in the district's approach to the special education problem. She illustrates the difficulty districts face with the complex combination of inadequate funding and special education staffing shortage. She also alluded to

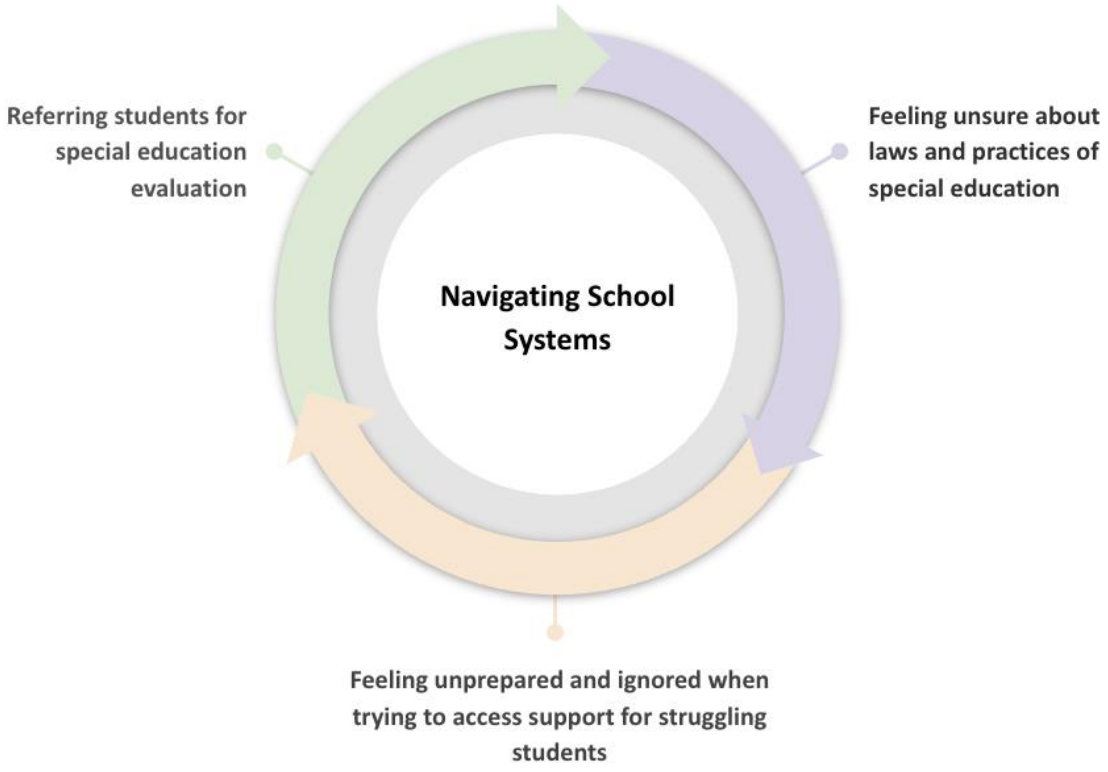
the unpredictability of special education from year to year and how unpredictable funding and resources are.

Navigating School Systems and Special Education Processes

Teachers also shared stories about their experiences with the special education process, particularly the referral process. First, teachers discussed the emotional struggle around referring students, particularly those with historically marginalized identities. Second, they expressed frustration with the referral process, special education systems, and their lack of training to work with specific challenges in their classrooms.

Teacher B articulated a sentiment shared by all four teachers: “I think our system is broken. I think how we qualify kids was broken. I think there's not enough resources for kids who need help.” Figure 6 shows the three central challenges that teachers felt when trying to navigate their school system.

Figure 6: Navigating School Systems



Teachers shared their challenges and frustration when seeking support for their students. The four teachers expressed feeling lost throughout the process. Teacher C, the newest teacher in the study, talked about her lack of training in understanding the legal implications of IEPs and special education services.

> And nobody was like, it wasn't explicitly like said, like, what to do? They just told us that IEPs are important. That's it. Follow it. That's it. Huh? Oh, yeah. Sounds like super confused. They really didn't explicitly tell us, like, why is important, I didn't know until I went to the education itself in the classroom about, oh, it's a law, and actually talking to like, school psych itself. (C)

In special education law, IEPs are supposed to guide all services provided to any student who qualifies. Teacher C's experience in her teaching preparation program did not prepare her to interpret IEPs or recognize their legal importance. The implications of her experience in her

training are significant in the continued marginalization of students with disabilities. The foundation for implementing special education services is lost without proper training in understanding the core documentation of student needs. This approach also indicates to general education teachers that understanding the special education system is not their responsibility. Teacher C further described her lack of preparedness for working directly with students with disabilities.

> And, of course, out of the whole entire year of getting my master's was definitely not enough, I wish someone had helped me process how to read an IEP, not just like, here's what it looks like, right? Here's how you can do accommodation. Here's what you can do as like a foundation, if you have an autistic student, if you have a student who have ADHD, if you have a student that is neurodivergent, who is all of that as not just, oh, let's talk about like the labels and what they mean. That's not what I need. (C)

This omission of practical training again signifies to general education teachers that their neurodiverse students do not matter when these students need the most differentiation and individualized support. This perpetuates the message that students who need additional services are not valued in general education settings, despite the political push for inclusion.

Like Teacher C, Teacher A talked about her confusion when she began teaching.

> Because I didn't understand like, I knew I was supposed to, like, fill out this form and take all this data, but I didn't understand what they were going to do with it. (A)

She speaks to the disconnect between her role as the classroom teacher and the systemic process. While she knew her responsibilities, she was in the dark about how the information she provided would be used to support her students. Beyond her classroom, the process was a mystery to her.

Teacher B, the most veteran teacher in this study, spoke about the number of changes in special education policy that she has seen across her career.

> I don't even know what the qualifying model is anymore. I know like for, because at one time it was discrepancy, you know, the discrepancy between their IQ and their performance. That was, yeah, that was the model, then it moved away from that model. And I can't remember what it moved to, but it like moved away from that. And then I feel like it started moved back towards that discrepancy model. So honestly, I don't even know what they're like, What qualifies them anymore? (B)

Teacher B illustrates the disconnect between state special education policy and the practice of that policy. She felt exasperated with trying to keep up with the shifting qualifying model, which is set at the state level but can vary in implementation from district to district. She also felt that policy did not help her access support for her students, particularly when policy changes were not communicated with schools. The policy seemed to have little impact on how she worked to support her students.

Conceptualizing the Referral Process

The teachers in this study identified the tension between wanting to support their students and a systemic push to refrain from referring students for evaluations. They spoke with frustration about having no good choice. To refer a student caused pushback from others, guilt, and feeling helpless; to not refer was to potentially deny a student much-needed support and intervention and to feel that the teacher was never doing enough. In many public schools, including this one, the choice feels binary, shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Two Paths of Advocacy

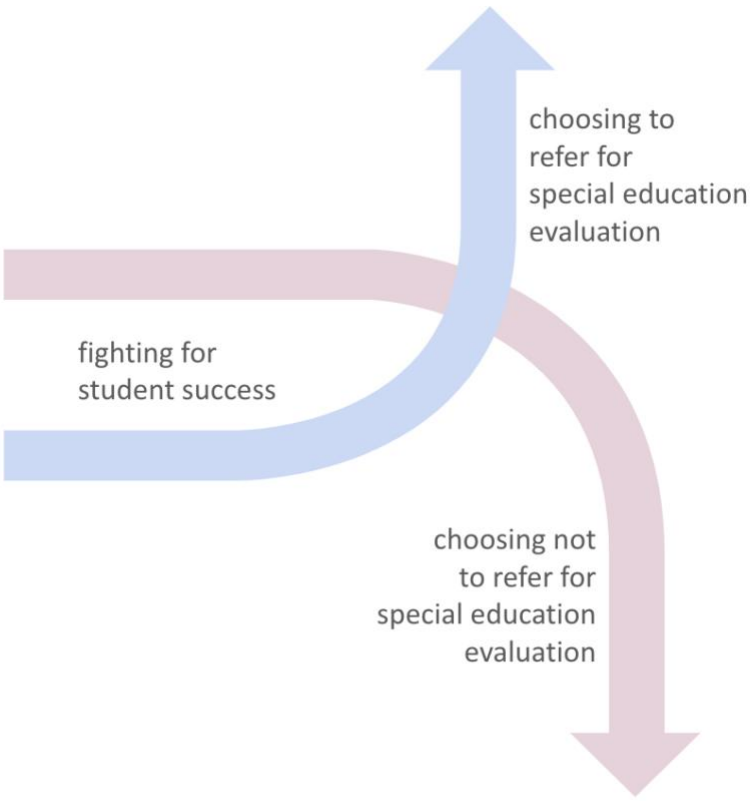


Table 9 shows each participant's referrals in the last three years. The difference in numbers illustrates a vastly different approach across teachers in conceptualizing and utilizing the referral process. For this study, referring a student is defined as bringing a student of concern to the student support team to consider a special education evaluation.

Table 9: Teacher Referrals in the Last Three Years

Teacher	Student Demographics	Referral Reason
Teacher A	No referrals	No referrals
Teacher B	Black male	Both academics and behavior
	Native male	Both academics and behavior
	Latina female	Both academics and behavior
Teacher C	Latino male	Academics
	Black male	Behavior
Teacher D	Black female	Academics
	Latina female	Academics
	Pacific Islander male	Academics
	Black male	Academics
	Black and Puerto Rican male	Academics
	White male	Academics
	Asian female	Both academics and behavior

Of the 12 students that were referred, eight were male, and four were female. One of the 12 was white, one was Asian, one was Native American, one was Pacific Islander, one was Black and Puerto Rican, three were Latiné, and four were Black. One student was referred for behavior, seven were referred for academics, and three were referred for both academics and behavior.

Teachers in the study shared several frustrations with the referral process when they had concerns about students. Teachers expressed that it didn't feel like an effective system and that staff across the school had different agendas. Three teachers agreed that, ultimately, the referral process led to feelings of invalidation and confusion.

Teacher B discussed the invalidation she felt as a veteran teacher when bringing a student to the support team.

> When we go to MTSS [the school referral team], it's like, well, have you tried this, if you don't like there's a laundry list of all the things that that's like, Okay, I'm experienced enough that I've already done all those things. If I'm coming to you, I'm ready for that next step. But yeah, they make you have to go back and do you know, six weeks of this and then okay, go back. (B)

She felt that her experience as a teacher was dismissed and that bringing a student to MTSS was a waste of her time. She lamented that the support team could not give her new steps or advice until she could show six weeks of data collection on a student. She felt that her expertise and concern about a student should be enough to move forward in obtaining additional support for a student instead of spending another six weeks collecting data.

On the flip side, Teacher A shared the perspective of one of the special education teachers.

> And our resource room [RSP] teacher has said too that she feels like, people are pushing for students to be evaluated, and they don't necessarily need to be evaluated, like, and if they do, it's going to be the teacher getting resources and strategies for their classroom. And like, she's like, I don't think people understand that. And I'm like, Yeah, I don't, I don't think people understand that either. And, like, maybe that means that we need to have a discussion around that at a next staff meeting or something like that. Yeah, so I don't think it's very clear what exactly happens when students are being referred. (A)

Teacher A identified the differing perspectives among staff at the school. She noted the lack of cohesion in understanding what a special education evaluation entails and alluded to the

disconnect between special education and general education teachers. This again spoke to the difficulty in using a system understood differently by different parties.

Two teachers in this study described opposing approaches to the referral process. Teacher A did not refer any students in the last three years. She described her reasoning.

> And so I just felt like it wasn't doing them a favor to refer them when they're still trying to figure things out. If I did have a concern about like, a developmental delay or something that or behaviorally, I would talk to the parents first and be like, Hey, this is kind of what I'm noticing, are you noticing the same thing at home? If it's a concern to you, like it might be worth it to check out with your doctor, sort of like putting it on the parents in that way. (A)

Like Teacher D, Teacher A was committed to doing what she felt was best for her students. She believed that giving struggling students more time to develop was in their best interest. Her first step was to talk to families and recommend that they seek medical advice. She shared hesitancy about referring students as kindergarten and first graders. She first sought support outside of the school and special education system.

In contrast, Teacher D described using the referral process as a tool for advocacy for her students. She referred nine students to the student support team in the last three years.

> I'm gonna find ways to throw every person and every support advocate that I possibly can to help them be successful. I like will not wait. Like, as soon as I see that there's like something going on. Like, as soon as that form opens up, I'm like filling it out to get on the schedule as soon as possible. So I did do that, like for the last couple of years, so like, I do have some I can talk a little bit about my kids this year, like because I, when I prioritize, getting it done like really early, as soon as I noticed something's going on. (D)

Teacher D stated that utilizing every available system was the best way to advocate for her struggling students. She labeled her approach as proactive and used the phrase “pushy” to describe herself. Her stance emphasized her value of early intervention. She also discussed the

importance of communicating concerns with families and involving them in the referral process to help them access more support.

She also echoed Teacher A's concerns about referring students. Teacher C spoke about the tension that existed for her in the current system and the emotional weight the decision to refer a student carried for her.

> It's, it's really hard, it's really hard to know and not be able to do anything because there, I understand why there are things in place to prevent over evaluation, especially with the prevalence of over evaluating Black boys in particular, like I totally understand, like, we don't want to put more people in the special education if they just need time, or if they just need or if they're just like, young or whatever it may be. (C)

Teacher C understood the statistics and reasoning behind the push for limiting special education referrals. She spoke about feeling helpless when faced with the decision to refer a student, especially a Black boy. She also touched on the challenge of timing that kindergarten and first-grade teachers face when considering whether to refer a student. Studies show that students who receive early intervention are more likely to exit special education services (Guralnick, 1997), while there is the competing thought that students may need more time in school and will "grow out" of their challenges. These seemingly contradictory ideas indicate that a third option other than referring or not referring is needed. However, this school did not have an early intervention model without a special education referral, leaving teachers with the binary choice of referring or not referring.

All teachers in the study indicated awareness and concern about referring students, particularly students with historically marginalized identities, for special education referrals. Participant C explained the tension she feels when concerned about a student.

> And so there's a lot of pushback. Right? Which is, okay, like, make sense. There's a lot of kids that being referred, right, and once we label this kid in the special education system, and once they're in that pipeline, it's very hard for them to exit out, and the graduation rates lowers down. So I understand that part. And at the same time, what if we're, what if we're dis-serving this kid? Of getting evaluated? Right? So that's me. (C)

Teacher C clearly indicated her understanding and worry about outcomes for students in special education. She knew that the decision to qualify a student for special education was not taken lightly and had statistical long-term negative impacts. However, she also pointed to the glaring problem for general education teachers: there wasn't a functional alternative in schools right now. Teacher C spoke repeatedly about her positionality as a teacher of color and her concern about contributing to the disproportionality in special education.

> The student that I was just spoke, like, I'm hoping to get evaluated for an IEP and potentially cognitive delay is a male Hispanic student which I'm not very proud of. (C)

Teacher C indicated her ethical dilemma of supporting a struggling student with a marginalized identity in her classroom. She identified the shame of referring a boy of color and decided that these two students needed more support than she could provide in her classroom.

All four teachers spoke to the complex nature and ethical challenge of referring a student for special education. These internal struggles were compounded by the confusion teachers expressed around the legal special education evaluation process and the internal school process. The decision on whether or not to advocate for a referral or additional support is already a heavy one due to the statistical outcomes for students in special education, and the lack of clarity on the systems and process adds to the already emotional decision.

Fighting for Services

Three teachers in this study described their roles in obtaining student support as "fighting" or "pushing." The sentiment among these teachers was that they had to face an opposing force to get students what they needed. Teachers conceptualized this opponent as other school staff (school psychologists or special education teachers), administrators, and district policies.

Teacher D was the participant who spoke the most about fighting for her students. She described the emotion that she felt when advocating for her students.

> And there's some kiddos who I've definitely had to kind of fight for getting them the services that they need. I mean, I sat in the meeting and cried one time, because I knew this kiddo needed the help, and his mom was completely on board, and wanted him to get the help, just the process of the whole thing. And, you know, we finally, eventually did, but it's just like this should not be and this was years ago, because he just graduated from college. (D)

She named the emotional impact her advocacy for her students had on her. She also described the positive outcome for this student, noting that he graduated from college once he had the services he needed. In this particular instance, Teacher D noted that the student's family was also advocating for services, and she expressed frustration with accessing services.

Teacher B described a similar experience once she was able to help one of her students receive services.

> And we finally got him the services and the help. And, you know, it was like, it wasn't like, all magic, he's all fixed, but now he's finally gonna get what he needs. (B)

She recognized that getting special education services was not a fix-all but a step toward helping this student succeed. Teacher B's use of the term "we" shows that she felt advocating

for this student was a team effort. She conveyed a sense of relief that she successfully moved the student toward the support they needed.

Teacher D expressed her deep frustration about advocating for a recent student.

> But I don't have currently any say in that I've been fighting for him all year. I've been fighting for him since week one of school to try to get him where he needed to be and get him to support that he needs. And I've basically been told to wait for a while. And it's been extremely painful, then, and to not be able to just be doing my best for them. (D)

Her story illustrated the recurring theme of teachers being told to wait when they expressed concern about a student. For Teacher D, waiting felt like it was causing additional harm to this student, which negatively impacted her. She became so frustrated that she sought support outside of her school setting.

> Okay, I have done everything that I possibly can do. I actually went to the union because they didn't feel like they were doing anything. (D)

Teacher D's approach to student advocacy is again illustrated in her willingness to potentially involve a legal element in her activism. Involving the teacher's union is a layer of protection for teachers, providing access to legal counsel and a higher level of advocacy for both students and teachers.

Teacher B shared the opposite experience, advocating for a student in her class who was doing well. This student transferred to her class from another state with an IEP indicating significant behavioral concerns. She described her perception of this student as vastly different from what she saw in his IEP.

> You walked in my room, you would not know, this kid from any of my other kids. And I've joked the other day I said, this is the first time I've ever I'm ever gonna have to fight to get a kid out of special ed instead of in…I'm gonna push hard to say he doesn't need like, let's maybe put him on a consultation type deal in case

> something catastrophic happens but whole different kid and I know I keep saying has nothing to do with me. (B)

This experience was notable to Teacher B because it was the first time in her career that she felt a student received more services than needed. She spoke about this child and experience as a welcome change to how she usually engages in the special education process. Interestingly, she still conceptualized her advocacy for this student as something she has to "fight" for.

Going Above and Beyond

Individual Responsibility. The same three teachers felt responsible for doing everything in their power for their students, even when it fell outside their job description. Teachers spoke of things ranging from using personal funds to providing medical advocacy to recreating curriculum for students.

Teacher D summarized the sentiment expressed by all three teachers, which was that the responsibility to implement services for her students is ultimately on her.

> I have found that a lot of times I am making, like as much as it is collaborative, when they have like a diagnosed disability and like on an IEP, it's still like ultimately up to me to be making these decisions and seeing what's going on with them and like seeing what help they need and advocating for them. (D)

For some teachers, this responsibility led to work beyond their job description and outside their contract hours. For instance, Teacher C spoke about how she has had to be proactive in her professional learning to adequately support her students.

> And I actually, you know, am still learning by like, going to the classroom itself, like, going to the ACP, or functional core classrooms talking to sped teachers themselves, and our school psych, like, I have a really good relationship and [school psychologist], so she kind of helps me understand like, neurodivergent, and like our speech therapists in our OT, like making sure like that I just kind of

> communicate with them and like, ask them what resources and what good books and I read so that I can be more aware of my own like teaching. (C)

She spent time outside her contract hours to learn from other staff members with more experience with neurodiverse students and students who received special education services. She also relied on those relationships, stating that spending time watching special education teachers with students helped her with her teaching. She prioritized improving her teaching and essentially created her own professional development. None of this work was part of her contract hours or job description.

Supporting Students in Classrooms Through Teaching Practices. Teachers B, C, and D also discussed supporting neurodiverse students inside the classroom, from curriculum adjustments to behavior incentives. They talked about the need to be creative and how they tried to help their students succeed in their classrooms.

Teacher D talked about the mismatch between the provided curriculum and student needs.

> I'm making those changes to be effective for my kids because the curriculum is not meant for kids with disabilities. It is not meant for a lot of kids in general, but it's certainly not meant for kids with disabilities. (D)

She named the challenge that many teachers face, where the district-selected curriculum doesn't necessarily resonate with her students. Her comment also pointed to her belief that many students in her class struggled to access the curriculum, whether or not they had a disability label. She also talked about ways she worked around that and the emotional impact that work had on her.

> But I got really creative with him that year. And that desire to like, be really creative to support the kid and like really find a solution that works for them is something that I will not forget, from my experience with working with him is

> like, like, I cried a lot over him that year, I cried a lot over him the next year, because I was just like, so worried about him. (D)

Her commitment to finding a way to help students succeed was a deeply personal one. Her description of the emotional aspect of trying to figure out on her own how to support students was a common experience. This student was also pivotal for her, especially in her ongoing worries about him and his lasting impact on her teaching practices.

Teacher C shared a slightly different perspective on her curricular practices. She spoke about Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a pedagogical approach to teaching that emphasizes delivering content in multiple modalities depending upon the learners in the classroom. Teacher C talked about how practices that are advertised for neurodiverse students are also beneficial to neurotypical students.

> I just know, however, because I practice, like UDL in my classroom, I know that if I focus on my students that have IEPs, and I actually make that my core of instruction, and do accommodate for them, it accommodates for everybody in the classroom. And so I try, I shift my mindset of like, well, rather than doing this individual things for my students to have it, what if I just make that the center of my instruction, and UDL really made it like, if you do this to everybody working for a lot of like learners that are auditory that are, you know, more of a visual more of a, like sensory. And so I incorporate those three things in my, in my instruction, so that it's incorporating for every single student of mine, because I don't know, like, a lot of my kids are different cultures. (C)

Teacher C indicated seeing disability as one of many identities, including culture and preferred learning styles. She noted that disability is one of many factors that define her students and that by using UDL she hopes to teach in a way that resonates with all her students. She also mentioned that changing her teaching required changing her mindset on how she thinks about her students and teaching.

Outside the Scope of Teaching. Of all the participants, Teacher D expressed feeling the most pressure to go beyond the role of a typical classroom teacher and her contract to support her students. She described spending her own money and creating a Donor's Choose campaign in her work to set up her classroom for all her students.

> A lot of the materials I have in my room for students with disabilities like as far as like fidgets and flexible seating and things like that a lot of that has been like self-funded, though. It's not something that came from the school. It's something that I prioritized for myself, and I did it Donors Choose at one point, but a lot of it has been like self-funded, and just things that I know are important and that the kids need. They're not necessarily from the school. So it is something that I kind of had to take into my own hands and make decisions about like what my students would need to be successful. (D)

She also described helping a family navigate the medical system to help a student get glasses, even though she had no prior experience with the process.

> And so I was trying to figure out what supports need to be in place for her because I don't have vision expertise on that. And so I was able to get someone from the district vision team to come to the meeting and like, tell me what like needs to happen to get her support and like, what kind of support she would like be able to get at school, like what kind of accommodations might she need, like things like that, I was also able to, she's a student that qualifies for McKinney vento. So I was able to talk to our counselor to get to be able to like use funds to get new glasses for her because her old glasses broke. (D)

Teacher D passionately advocated for her students far outside the scope of her job as a general education teacher. She felt a connection and emotional obligation to get her students the support they needed to be successful in her classroom, even if that support was outside of the school's capacity. For Teacher T, teaching was far more than a job. It was a labor of love for her students and their families.

Activism as a Teacher of Color

Teacher C was the one teacher of color in this study and her experience as a teacher activist was noticeably different from her white colleagues. Beginning with her motivation for becoming a teacher, her racial identity was a significant factor in her work with students with disabilities.

> And so I told myself, I need to be in education. I'm not Black, but I am a person of color. And I want to be I want students of color to be represented and have a mirror and the classroom that they go into. (C)

While the other teachers in the study wanted to help students, Teacher C wanted students to feel represented and to see a person of color in a position of power. She recognized the different impact she could have as a teacher of color in a system with predominately white women teachers. Her motivation for being a teacher was rooted not just in caring for students but in a core part of her identity.

She talked about growing up in the Philippines and what she realized about education when she moved to the US for college.

> And as I got into my, my experience in my education and learning more about the education system here in United States, I definitely was like yeah, this is my why I need to break down systems of oppression for Brown and Black students. And, you know, dismantle the system that is created because when Brown versus Board was approved, we all know that Black like teachers of color, and student of color are not welcome in the schools. So that's my why. (C)

Teacher C learned about the history of US public education as a young adult and saw that history as a personal call to action partly because of her racial identity. She named her frustration with current psychological and educational research and again referenced the importance of multiple identities.

> And like be explicit of what race background and background did he actually tested for this for this study, and so, and what surrounding of, like the surrounding, you know, kind of impacted his study. He wasn't very, like, very explicit on that. He was more like, oh, everyone's brain is the same. No, not everyone's brain is the same. (C)

Teacher C's understanding of multiple identities stood out among all the teachers. She talked about pedagogical practices, current research, and honoring her students across all their identities. Her activism was also much more personal, and she felt that her racial identity was an important factor in her teaching practice and advocacy for her students.

Summary

This chapter summarizes the findings within the teacher interview: lucky relationships and fighting for students. Teachers consistently talked about wanting the best for each of their students and how that goal could directly conflict with the expectations of the district leadership and other school staff. They named the immense emotional impact they experienced when advocating for their students, including the guilt they felt when referring Black and Brown students for special education evaluations. They talked about knowing the outcomes for students in special education and feeling torn and unable to serve all students in their under-resourced general education classrooms. Chapter 5 details the implications of these findings and future directions for researchers.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Public education is a broken system, an undercurrent that runs through each teacher's stories. From their experiences as students to their teacher training programs to their current goals of advocating for their students, they face systemic barrier after barrier. Instead of being able to count on clear avenues for understanding and supporting students with disabilities, teachers had to rely on luck and a willingness to battle for every student to get the education promised by a democracy.

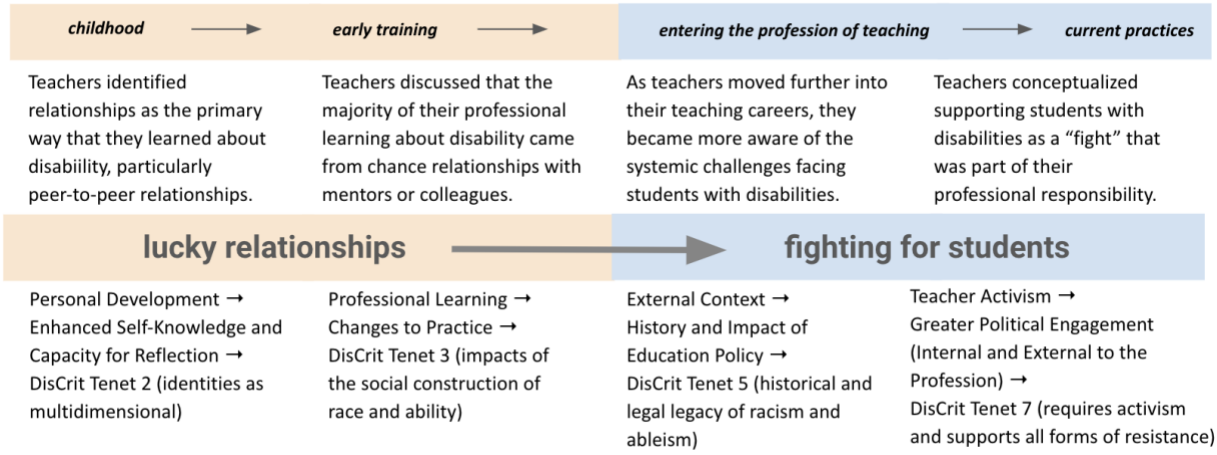
Chapter 4 detailed the findings from this study and laid out the Teacher Journeys that were shared during interviews. In Chapter 5, I connect the themes and findings from Chapter 4 to the relevant literature and theory. I connect the Teacher Journey to the conceptual framework of this study and discuss the deeper implications of my findings. I then discuss the disconnect between the teacher interviews and my literature review from Chapter 2. Finally, I share the limitations of this study and end with implications for practice and directions for future research.

Teacher Journey and Conceptual Framework

At the core of these stories were the Teacher Journeys. Each teacher shared experiences from childhood through now as they explained how they made sense of disability. Figure 8 ties the Teacher Journeys to the Conceptual Framework elements. Beginning in childhood with lucky relationships, Mockler's 2011 Teacher Identity Model element of personal development and DisCrit Tenet 2. In their childhood stories, teachers talked about their lucky relationships leading to "enhanced self-knowledge and capacity for reflection." These relationships led teachers to a

deeper understanding of disability and disability justice, and allowed them to expand their personal knowledge.

Figure 8: Teacher Journey and Conceptual Framework



As their journeys moved into early training and they encountered more lucky relationships, teachers began to develop their identities as professional learners and educators. Their understanding of education and systems grew, which led to them entering the profession of teaching with personal connections to disability. They began to transition into Mockler's central concept of "Being" a Teacher, forcing them to begin navigating school systems and working with students with disabilities. The lucky relationships that exposed the teachers to disabilities opened the door for advocacy and fighting for students with disabilities. In their new positions of power as teachers, they began to find ways to access support for students who were struggling in their classrooms. Their identities as teachers continued to grow as they faced the challenges of their external contexts and DisCrit Tenet 5, the historical and legal legacy of racism and ableism.

When the teachers spoke about current practices, they shared a commitment to using their power to get their students what they needed. They talked about the students they fought for, and the ways they pushed against the system for the benefit of their students. Mockler's identity element of teacher activism and DisCrit Tenet 7 (supporting all forms of activism and resistance) as a way to further engagement in the profession were evident in each teacher's journey.

Luck Isn't Enough

When teachers spoke about the element of "luck" in learning about disability, they expressed gratitude for significant people in their lives. One teacher spoke about a friend she met in college who had cerebral palsy; another talked about an experienced special education teacher in the classroom next door to her during her first year of teaching. When learning about disability, no teacher expressed significant learning through formalized school or teacher preparation programs. They all told stories of the people who had challenged and changed their perspectives.

Giangreco et al.'s 1993 study interviewing teachers aligns with participants' experiences. This study found that when students with severe disabilities were included in their general education classrooms, 17 out of 19 teachers reported increased comfort and "transformative" experiences. Results from Agran et al.'s 2020 study also showed that general education teachers who had students with disabilities in their classes became more comfortable and confident in teaching all of their students. Overall, the literature on general education teachers who work with students with disabilities indicates a positive impact on teachers and all students. This

speaks to relationships' massive impact in building up awareness and understanding of disability.

In understanding these lucky relationships, it is clear that professional organizations that prepare and train teachers do not put any intentional focus on disability education. For teachers who play such a pivotal role in teaching and supporting students with disabilities, this is very problematic. It is likely that the teachers different levels of understanding disability and the general education teacher role in special education was in part due to a lack of cohesive, thoughtful training.

The Referral Dilemma

It is important to note that, in this school, there was little middle ground between a student in general education and being referred for special education. Many schools in Washington are shifting to a tiered system of interventions, where support should be available for students who need more than is offered in general education. Starting in 2025, some state funding for public school intervention programs will be contingent upon a school having tiered interventions and showing clear intervention data before a special education referral (OSPI, 2024). Theoretically, this should shift some school systems, allowing teachers to refer students for interventions without directly jumping to a special education evaluation referral. If schools can meet this new requirement, the hope is that special education referrals and subsequent qualifications will decrease.

This is especially important because the literature shows that placement in special education significantly impacts a child's statistical outcomes. Artiles (2019) and Sanford et al. (2011) found that students with a special education label have a higher dropout rate, lower

academic achievement, discipline inequities, a higher likelihood of an engagement with the juvenile justice system, lower employment rates, and are less likely to attend college. Carteledge (2005) noted that very few students exit special education services once they are labeled with a disability. While the teachers in this study indicated some level of understanding about the potential consequences of a special education label, three still felt it was their only option to get the support their students need. Essentially, they felt they had to choose between the lesser of two evils: continuing to watch students struggle in general education or getting them support that could negatively impact their future outcomes.

When the teachers spoke about referring students, their reasons did not directly align with the most recent research and statistics. In a 2022 study, Fish interviewed 27 teachers about their experiences referring students for special education, and her findings aligned with much of the previous research (Mays et al., 2020; Gentrup et al., 2020; Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Lewis & Diamond 2015; Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001). The referral statistics of the teacher participants in this study aligned with the research showing that gender narratives cause teachers to under-refer girls (Fish, 2022). However, Fish's finding that white teachers overemphasize behavior problems for students of color (especially girls) was directly reflected in the teacher referral statistics. Teacher B, who is white, referred three students of color for both academic and behavior concerns. Teacher D, also white, referred six students for purely academic reasons and one Asian female for both academic and behavioral concerns. Neither of them referred any students of color for purely behavioral reasons. The only teacher who referred a student of color for behavior concerns was Teacher C, who is Filipina. While the overall number of students of color referred aligns with Fish's findings, the reasons for the

referrals do not. When the teachers in this study spoke about this disproportionality, they discussed race and gender, which is consistent with the focus of current literature. Very little has been studied on how socioeconomic status or location relates to special education referrals and services. At the same time, the teachers in this study alluded to understanding the over-identification of Black boys, which has been well documented in research. Their awareness of disproportionality aligned with the focus of research on race and gender disproportionality in special education.

Many referrals for special education evaluations come from general education teachers and are based on the teacher's experience of what a "typical" student looks like in their classroom. Fish (2017) and Gerber (2005) both found that there is a wide range of teaching pedagogy and contextual factors that cause teacher judgement of students to predominantly come from internalized beliefs about race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and language. Several different studies (Reynolds et al., 2021; Hosp & Reschly, 2003; Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 1986) all found that most students referred for evaluation by teachers are eventually qualified for special education. The teachers in this study spoke about students who did not have special education labels or medical diagnoses as having ADHD or characteristics of Autism. None of these teachers had psychology or mental health training but were still interpreting behaviors without using objective data. This potentially led to unwarranted referrals for students. Coupled with the fact that white teachers are the majority of teachers in the US (Sleeter, 2023), Thorius (2019) found that white teachers contribute heavily to the problem of disproportionality. The white teachers in my study did not discuss their own identities or reflect on their positionality. This speaks to the issue of unidentified racial or gender bias when making

referrals. However, teachers often have few options for accessing support for their struggling students and see special education as one of the only available resources. This was reiterated by the teachers in this study, who felt that they had no means of support beyond their own capabilities other than special education. This illustrates Dowdy's 2013 study, which found that many teacher referrals deviated from using objective data collection and relied more on teacher perception.

A primary theme across teacher interviews that likely impacted teacher referral statistics was feeling unprepared to work with students with disabilities or who needed additional support in the general education classroom. This is another phenomenon Fish (2022) looked at in her work. In her study of 27 teachers, many of them expressed that they did not understand very much about working with students with disabilities. Fish pointed out that this likely led to a reliance on potentially problematic biases when making referrals. This continued disproportionately impacts students of color, as the most recent data from the US Department of Education (from the 2019-2020 school year) shows that students of color receive proportionately more special education services than their white peers. When teachers feel unprepared to work with students with disabilities, there is an inherent racial element in which students are most impacted.

Limits of a Public School System

When participants spoke about navigating the public school system for their students, teachers' expressions of gratitude changed to frustration. They spoke of the confusion, anger, and sadness they felt in trying to find support for their students. Teacher B said that she had been in education for so long that she had stopped trying to keep track of the metrics used to

qualify students for special education, as they had changed so much throughout her career. She felt a sense of deep exasperation, corroborated by many veteran teachers I spoke with outside of this study. Several participants expressed feeling alone in fighting for their students, citing administrators and school psychologists who disagreed with the teachers' concerns. Teacher D said she felt she had to constantly bother school staff to get them to take her seriously.

One of the primary problems that became evident in hearing these teachers' stories is that special education and serving students with disabilities in public schools is a problematic self-perpetuating cycle. Classroom teachers are told that they are over-referring students for special education services and that keeping students in general education is best for students. While this is true regarding statistical outcomes, general education classrooms become increasingly under-resourced by the year. Class sizes are growing, as is the level of trauma and behavior challenges that general education teachers are expected to handle. Teachers and support staff are leaving schools in droves due to lack of pay and poor working conditions. This puts general education teachers in an impossible situation. They often know that a student struggling to succeed in their classroom needs additional support, but the avenues for accessing that support are narrow. A significant shift in the system that focuses on more resources and centers disability justice is desperately needed. While individual teachers can engage in personal growth and learning to improve their practice, they continue to operate in a system that does not value or support students with disabilities.

Same Goals, Opposite Approaches

Interestingly, while all teachers spoke about their professional duty to advocate for their students, their philosophies on the best way to do this were vastly different. Teacher A felt it

was her responsibility to do everything she could in her kindergarten classroom and did not believe it was ethical to refer a kindergarten student for a special education evaluation. She shared that she felt students in kindergarten were too young and just beginning to understand school, and it would be unfair to identify them for special education. On the other end of the spectrum, Teacher D stated that she was the first person in her school to bring up students of concern each school year. She felt that her responsibility was to access every resource available in the public school system as soon as possible to help her students succeed.

These themes speak to a systemic inequity within the already inequitable education system: general education teacher understanding and knowledge of special education and disability (Szocik et al., 2021; Siuty, 2019). Teachers relied on chance mentorship experiences and witnessing individual student struggles for their education about neurodiversity and disability. Understanding a diverse student population depended on random personal and professional experiences rather than intentional training and exposure. While teachers felt responsible for advocating for their students, there was not a singular way that they successfully navigated the education system. They all grappled with the tension between wanting to give students the support they needed and not placing students in Special Education unnecessarily.

Disconnects Between Literature and Teacher Interviews

My literature review explored several concepts participants did not address in their interviews. First, there is a significant body of literature on the social stigma of disability and the categories outlined in IDEA to qualify students for special education services. Teachers did not directly discuss the stigma or judgment of students with disabilities. When discussing obtaining special education services for their students, teachers focused on the services instead of the

label, contrasting how the literature approaches qualifications for special education. This indicates a divide between the theoretical approach to understanding disability and the practical work in schools.

Secondly, the white teachers did not reflect on their racial and ethnic positionality, which was discussed in my conceptual framework through Mockler's (2011) *Teacher Model of Identity.* The teacher of color repeatedly referenced her racial and ethnic identity as having a big impact on her understanding of disability and her motivations as a teacher. She also named feeling guilt about referring a student of color, whereas the white teachers did not discuss feelings about the identities of the students they referred. This indicates that white teachers may not be as conscious of disproportionality and may be quicker to refer students for special education. None of the teachers in this study expressed an understanding of the intersectionality of disability. While they did not explicitly discuss the medical mode of disability, they all spoke about disability as an isolated identity until directly asked about student identities. Some labels (ADHD and autism) came up frequently in the conversations, while others (EBD) were not discussed at all.

Teachers have massive power in qualifying students for special education and changing the trajectory of their lives. The current system and shortage of resources have forced general education teachers to become quasi-diagnosticians in the pursuit of advocating for students. Yet they are doing so without considering their positionality. They also indicated that they did not fully understand disability labels or the intersections of disability and other identities. In this flawed system, teachers hold power without having the depth of knowledge needed to make such life-altering decisions, which likely leads to further disproportionality.

When considering these stories, it is critical to revisit the theoretical lens of DisCrit (Annamma et al., 2013). The teachers in this study discussed disability without bringing up race or gender until they were directly asked about those identities. As Stapleton & James (2020) noted, most disability work and definitions are based exclusively on white cisgender people with disabilities, which mirrors how the teachers discussed disability. The teachers in this study did not reference the historical policies or societal context that continue to harm students with disabilities. The only tenet of DisCrit evident in these conversations with teachers was Tenet Seven, which emphasizes the importance of action. Teachers all spoke about their ethical responsibility to advocate for their students but did not dig deeper into the importance of their own continued learning. It is important to note that the conceptual framework of this study illustrated gaps in teacher's understanding of disability and intersectional identities.

Implications for Practice

Many implications for practice emerged from this study. Early career teachers need designated time for cross-collaboration between general education and special education teachers and structures built into school planning time to collaborate and learn from each other. Training programs need to focus on breaking down the silos of special education versus general education teachers and students. For instance, special education teachers could be used as consultants and supports when general education teachers are facing challenges with students.

There is a fundamental disagreement between how teachers, administrators, and policy-makers approach students with disabilities. There is a lack of communication with teachers about how the special education evaluation system works and an oversimplification from districts and policymakers of how to address the problem of disproportionality. The surface-

level solution often pushed by districts and policymakers is to refer fewer students for special education evaluations. In practice, teachers express that doing what is best for their students is not that straightforward.

At its core, the struggle teachers face in supporting their students with disabilities is not an individual teacher problem. The lack of money, staffing, and resources forces teachers to find creative ways to navigate the system in pursuit of support for their students. Special education in the United States has never been fully funded per federal law, the effects of which are clear when talking to the teachers in this study.

There is also a clear lack of intentionality in teacher preparation programs, as none of the participants shared impactful experiences from their graduate training. This study indicates that changes in teacher education programs should be considered. It would benefit teacher preparation programs to combine general education and special education teacher courses intentionally. Preparation programs should also focus on responding to behavior challenges and specific strategies to support neurodiverse learners. Students should be able to complete their student teaching in both general and special education classrooms. Findings from this study also support the need for re-examining general education teacher training around neurodiverse students and students with disabilities.

The complexity of the current challenges facing teachers and students with disabilities indicates the need for a massive overhaul of school structures and policies. For teachers to feel adequately equipped to understand and work with students with disabilities, they need to be heard and feel that advocating for their students is a collaborative process, not a battle.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

I faced a few difficulties in my research data collection. Many teachers I contacted did not respond or were unwilling to participate. Scheduling interviews was challenging due to teachers' limited free time. Some additional factors that impacted teachers' interviews were the time of year, the composition of students with disabilities in their classrooms, and the teacher shortage. Teachers may have become disillusioned with the current external political environment, thus impacting the teacher activism section of the conceptual framework, which includes DisCrit tenets 5 and 7. Teachers may have also been too overworked to engage in personal development, which would influence the self-knowledge and capacity for reflection part of the conceptual framework. Finally, many teachers have anecdotally reported that students missing a year of in-person school due to the pandemic has led to greater challenges in behavior and academics, which would heavily influence their professional context.

This study was a snapshot of this moment, and interviews would likely differ during a different school year. Teachers are currently overworked, perhaps more than ever (García & Weiss, 2019), which may have impacted the data I collected. Recent studies have indicated that up to 30% of teachers are planning to leave the profession within five years (Perryman & Calvert, 2020), which could impact how teachers see themselves professionally.

Future research could include a similar study with special education teachers instead of general education teachers to explore the divide between the two areas of practice. Understanding how special education teachers conceptualize available supports in schools and referrals would be beneficial in understanding the larger systems at play. Research could also focus on how teachers are instructed to navigate seeking support for struggling students. A study that examined referral patterns across schools or districts could impact how schools

approach disproportionality. Much more work is needed to understand the full challenges of implementing inclusion practices at a school level. As the public school population becomes more diverse and school resources decrease, identifying ways to support teachers and students becomes even more critical.

Conclusion

This study explored the experiences that four general education early elementary teachers had throughout their lives with disability. They shared feelings of luck in learning about disability and the current battles they face in accessing services for their students. The biggest implication for practice that emerged was the limited number of options that teachers had for accessing support for their struggling students. This speaks to the broad systemic problems in public education that are contributing to disproportionality. These conversations illustrate the need for large shifts in practice and extensive further research to address the ever-growing problem of disproportionality in special education.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Welcome:
Thank you for participating in this study. My study has one main goal: to understand how you experience working with students with disabilities.

Introduction:
This interview will be divided into four parts. Today, I will primarily be asking you about personal experiences. In later interviews, I will ask you about your professional context and your external political environment. I truly want to understand your experiences and hear your stories; please feel free to answer the questions in whatever way you feel comfortable. There are no right or wrong answers. If a question is confusing, please let me know. If at any time, you do not want to answer a question or you want to end the interview, you have the right to do so.

Request permission to record and initiate recording

A. Tell me about why you became a teacher.

Personal Experience & Development (DisCrit Tenet 2)

A. How was your experience with disability growing up?
   What were you taught? Formally? Informally?
B. Tell me what your K-12 experience was like as a child.
    1. What was your school structure (segregated vs. inclusive)?
    2. What was your experience interacting with special education services?
    3. What was your experience interacting with students with disabilities?
    4. Were you at a public or a private school?
C. How would you describe your experiences as a teacher with students with disabilities?
    a. What formative moments stand out to you?

b. How have you interacted with students' families?
c. How does the school support you in your work with students with disabilities?

Professional Experience & Changes to Practice (DisCrit Tenet 3)

A. How well do you feel your teacher training program prepared you to work with students with disabilities?
    a. How many courses did you have on disability?
    b. How much was equity emphasized in your program?
    c. Is there something that would have helped you be more prepared to teach students with disabilities?
B. In the past three years, how many students did you refer for special education evaluation or a student support team meeting?
    a. What were usually the reasons for these referrals?
    b. Among the referrals, can you recall the gender and race of the students?
    c. When you referred students, what was the disability you thought they would be labeled with?
    d. As far as you know, what happened with the students you were referred in terms of placement and services?

External Political Environment (DisCrit Tenet 5)

A. How do your school and broader school district handle special education and disability topics and issues?
    a. How is the systemic set up of support for dealing with issues related to disability?
    b. How do you feel your colleagues view this topic?
    c. How does the administration view this topic?
    d. What district initiatives exist around disability and special education?
    e. What do you perceive to be the biggest challenges to achieving equity for students with disabilities?
    f. What does your school or district do well in regard to serving students with disabilities?

Teacher Activism & Political Engagement (DisCrit Tenet 7)

A. How to you define student success?
B. What do you feel is your primary role as a teacher?
C. How do you advocate for your students?
D. What are the systems set up to support student needs? Are they clear and easy to access?
E. Have you ever voiced an unpopular opinion in your professional setting? What happened?
F. Do you feel the administration/district supports you and your students? Why or why not?

How do you define success for your students?

Appendix B: Consent Form

Investigator: Devin Daugherty, EdS, NCSP / devinbd@uw.edu / 541.221.1778
Faculty Advisor: Janine Jones, PhD, NCSP / jjones2@uw.edu

Investigator's Statement

I am asking you to be in a research study that I am completing as part of my doctoral coursework at the University of Washington. The purpose of this consent form is to give you all the information you will need to help you decide whether or not to be in the study. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what I would ask you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." I will give you a copy of this form for your records.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to understand how general education teachers' experiences influence how they work with students with disabilities.

PROCEDURES

If you choose to be in this study, I would like to conduct three 1-hour interviews via Zoom. Each interview will have a unique focus. During the first interview, I will ask you questions about your personal experiences (your K-12 education experience). In the second interview, I will focus on your professional experience (your teacher training program and teaching experience). In the final interview, I will ask you questions about your current teaching situation and the broader political environmental context in which you teach. My goal is to understand and document your perspectives and experiences as deeply as I can.

With your permission, I would like to audiotape your interview so that I can have an accurate record of our conversation. I will transcribe this recording without identifiable information and destroy the recording after the study is over. Only I will have access to the recording, which will be kept in a secure location. If you would like a copy of the transcript of the interview, I will gladly provide you with one.

RISKS, STRESS, OR DISCOMFORT

Some people feel that providing information for research is an invasion of privacy. I have addressed concerns for your privacy in the section below. Some people feel self-conscious when notes are taken or interviews are recorded.

BENEFITS OF THE STUDY

You may not directly benefit from taking part in this research study. One benefit of this study is providing teacher training programs and district leadership with general information for improving teacher support and programming for students with disabilities.

OTHER INFORMATION

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate and you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Information about you is confidential. I will assign you a pseudonym and code the study information. I will keep the link between your name and the pseudonym code in a separate, secured location until the study is complete. Then I will destroy the information linking your information to the pseudonym. If the results of this study are published or presented, I will not use your name, or any other identifying information.

I may want to re-contact you for future related studies. Please indicate below whether you give me permission to re-contact you. Giving me permission to re-contact you does not obligate you in any way.

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact Devin Daugherty at the telephone number or email listed at the top of this form. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact either of my doctoral advisor, who is overseeing this project: Dr. Janine Jones, jjones2@uw.edu.

_____

Signature of investigator Printed Name Date

<u>Participant's statement</u>

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have questions later on about the research, I can ask the

investigator listed above. If I have questions about my rights as a research subject, I can contact one of the course instructors. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

____ I give permission for this researcher to audiotape my interview.
____ I do NOT give my permission for the researcher to audiotape my interview.

____ I give permission for the researcher to re-contact me to clarify information.
____ I do NOT give permission for the researcher to re-contact me to clarify information.

_____

Signature of participant Printed Name Date

Copies to:

Investigators' file
Participant