Celebrating Special Education Teachers Who Stay:

The Identity Development of Experienced Educators

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A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

2021

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Education

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Abstract

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This study aimed to learn more about what contributes to experienced special education teachers staying committed to the field, rather than focus on a deficit model of why educators leave. Five participants were interviewed about the development of their teaching and personal identities over time and their interactions across ecological systems (micro-, meso-, exo, and macro-). Findings suggest that teachers' personal and teaching identities play a role in their commitment to the field. Participants described protective factors to burnout which included administrative support, self-care routines, strong relationships with special education team members, faith, advocacy, and the opportunity for additional leadership roles. Evidence suggests that relationships with administrators are critical to a special education teachers' self-efficacy and feelings of increased commitment to the field. Future research should investigate how a teachers' personal identity influences their decisions to enter the field of special education and remain committed. Implications for administrators, teacher preparation programs, and induction programs are discussed.

To God - All of the glory belongs to Him.

Acknowledgements

I am blessed by the number of loved ones and colleagues who have contributed to my success in the doctoral program. Foremost, I am thankful to God who gives me strength, wisdom, and grit. He blessed me with three beautiful dogs, Hank, Stella, and Greta, who have provided me with endless joy and happiness, ensuring that I took breaks to walk, feed, and play with them. Without their presence, I could never have endured the isolation for days and nights reading, transcribing, analyzing data, writing, and editing. They are God's greatest gifts.

I am grateful for my extended family – biological and chosen. My aunt, Karen Peterson, the most beautiful woman I know both inside and out, taught me to love animals and be kind. My dad, James Eyre, and sister, Megan Eyre-Terwilliger, have taught me to be an independent thinker. I was able to refresh during mountain retreats with home-cooked food at my aunt and uncle, Connie and Dwight Hand's, house. I could not have endured all the driving to and from the University of Washington (UW) without the companionship of my best friend, Betty Minckler. So many friends who are also family pushed me to finish this beast, such as, Katie Jones, Karen Hanka, Allison Krieger, and my church group who prayed relentlessly.

Posthumously, I would like to honor the loved ones who influenced my decisions to pursue a doctorate. My sister, Arminda, ministered and touched countless lives in her short time on this earth, inspiring me to change careers, become a teacher, and live every day like it is my last. Undoubtedly, my Uncle Brad would be the proudest to see this achievement as he planted the seed for me to get a master's and PhD. Grandma Mac took me in at the age of twelve and always supported my education. While I know my loved ones are in heaven, my heart aches to have them here during this momentous benchmark.

I was blessed with two advisors during my doctoral program, Dr. Elizabeth (Beth) West and Dr. Carly Roberts. For the first years of my program, Beth took me under her wing and built my foundation at the UW through her extensive experience and knowledge. As Carly became my advisor, she was a mentor and cheerleader. She was relentless in holding weekly meetings where I professed each time that I had not written a word. Despite my stalled progress she provided me with judgement free guidance, motivation, and accountability measures. If I took the smallest baby step, she celebrated with the same enthusiasm as when I achieved a momentous benchmark. Not only do I have the world's best advisor, but my dissertation committee including Carly, Dr. Jane Macy, Dr. Kathleen Meeker, and Dr. Kevin Haggerty, have been instrumental in providing a safe environment where I look forward to their feedback and advice. They have helped me shift deficit thinking, so that I see the field and my research through a positive lens.

Throughout my time at the UW, there have been countless colleagues and professors who have shaped my development over the past six years. I still remember my first class when Dr. Roxanne Hudson told me that I belonged in graduate school despite my overwhelming sense of imposter syndrome. During my time as a special education teacher coach, Dr. Selma Powell and Dr. Ariane Gauvreau served as mentors and models of the type of supervisor I strive to be.
Last but not least, I have to thank (soon to be Dr.) Erin Stewart for her friendship and comradery as we have worked alongside each other through this journey, with late-night texts and Zoom sessions. Without her friendship and accountability partnership I would most definitely be All But Dissertation (ABD).

My heart is overflowing with gratitude for all of the ways God has guided me through this seemingly impossible task. People always ask me, "how do you do it?" but the only answer is by His grace.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

Researchers and school districts have spent decades studying special education teacher attrition focusing almost exclusively on factors external to the teachers, such as (a) demanding workloads (e.g. extensive paperwork, etc.; Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2003); (b) exclusive school climates (Griffin, 2009); (c) complex roles (Williams & Dikes, 2015); (d) challenging student characteristics (Wasburn-Moses, 2009); and (e) a general lack of appropriate qualifications (Billingsley et al., 2004). Historically, interventions designed to explore attrition and reduce turnover concentrate heavily on what is missing from the skill sets or contexts of teachers who turnover, rather than investigating educators who lead successful careers and building upon what those individuals do well (Howell & Gengel, 2005). In so doing, researchers have overlooked a critical question as to why, despite similar challenging external factors, some special education teachers decide to stay and lead productive, long-term careers and remain committed to working in solidarity with children who have (dis)abilities[1].

The Impact of Teacher Attrition on Students with Disabilities

All children deserve a right to high-quality education from committed teachers regardless of ability level, ethnic background, or socioeconomic status (Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), 2015). A teachers' longevity in the field leads to improved student outcomes because as educators gain experience, they are better able to develop a repertoire of research-based

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[1] I utilize the key term (dis)ability to resist language that arguably devalues individuals with (dis)abilities because the word in itself implies only disability and impairment, insinuating an inability to navigate the normative society (Annamma, Conner, & Ferri, 2013). While Annamma et al. (2013) utilize a '/' to disrupt oppressive views towards individuals by writing *"(dis)ability,"* my views coincide with Schalk (2018) who explains that using parentheses rather than the backslash provides a stronger visualization suggesting, "…the shifting, contentious, and contextual boundaries between disability and ability," p. 6). Like Annamma (2013), I will utilize the term 'disability' when referring to its official use within the education system.

instructional strategies (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008). A quality education from supportive teachers can serve as a protective factor that promotes positive outcomes for students who have been historically marginalized, including students with (dis)abilities (Fleming, Mackrain, & LeBuffe, 2013). Unfortunately, there is a historic shortage of special education teachers across the United States (Boe & Cook, 2006; DeMik, 2008; Ondrasek, Carver-Thomas, Scott, & Darling-Hammond, 2020). In California, the attrition crisis is compounded by an increased demand for special education teachers, lower enrollments in teacher preparation programs, and high turnover rates (Ondrasek et al., 2020). Furthermore, Ondrasek et al. (2020) reported that during the 2015-16 and 2016-17 school years, more than one out of every five teachers in special education schools left their positions. The Institute of Educational Sciences (IES; n.d.) reported that Washington State has had a shortage of special education teachers every year from the 2000-01 to the 2017-18 school years. While IES did not report special education teachers specifically, they did state that after the 2015-16 school year, 16% of all teachers left the field. Research tells us that special education teacher shortages are higher than the general education teacher rates (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2005), especially in high-poverty schools (Mason-Williams, Frederick, & Mulcahy, 2015; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). In 2006, Boe et al. found that 29% of first-year special education teachers changed schools or completely quit the job. According to Mason-Williams (2015), given the high attrition levels in high-poverty schools, students with (dis)abilities in these settings are not receiving equitable education.

In addition to being in schools that may struggle retaining high-qualified teachers, students with (dis)abilities in those settings may be marginalized in other ways. Students in high-poverty schools experience classism (Mason-Williams, 2015), but students with (dis)abilities face additional forms of oppression including but not limited to ableism (Leonardo & Broderick,

2011) and racism (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013; Artiles, 2013). This may be particularly true for students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD), who are often omitted from conversations around equity because the dominant ableist culture deems them too "cognitively impaired" to count (Leonardo et al., 2011, p. 2217). Contrastingly, the majority of the teaching force consists of white non-(dis)abled female teachers who may not experience or be aware of the multiple marginalization of their students (Taie, Goldring, & Spiegelman, 2018).

As such, researchers, school district administrators, and teacher preparation programs need to investigate how teachers' identities, especially as white and non-(dis)abled, influence their interactions with students and their families who may be multiply marginalized. Some argue that engaging in advocacy for students is part of the special education teachers' job (Griffin, Kilgore, Winn, & Otis-Wilborn, 2008). However, this becomes problematic if teachers have not reflected on how their own identity as white and non-(dis)abled allots them privilege and power over their students, given that the overwhelming majority of the teaching force is white (Taie, Goldring, & Spiegelman, 2018). For example, Urbach et al. (2015) found that novice teachers tended to exhibit a hero complex, believing that their purpose is to, "provide a safe haven for them [students with (dis)abilities], or a place where they could 'get love'" (p. 331). While creating a safe learning environment may benefit students, Urbach et al. found that novice teachers prioritize this at the expense of academic instruction. More experienced teachers in the Urbach et al. study reported helping students get the education they deserved, focusing on advocating alongside their students, not on behalf of, for access to quality instruction and inclusion opportunities. These findings suggest that although researchers can list the specific roles of special educators, teaching goes beyond these roles; teachers will vary in their interpretation of their role as an educator depending on their own lived experiences. Roegman,

Pratt, Sanchez, and Chen (2018) explain the importance of investigating individual teachers' interpretation of their role, which they refer to as sense making,

> Amongst the voices telling special education teachers what they *should do*, we neglect to hear how special education teachers *are making sense of* what they are doing – what has been forgotten is the intentional exploration of the meaningfulness of teaching. To explore meaning, we have to look beyond the teacher and into the core of those teaching (p. 293).

Better understanding how teachers make sense of their role is critical to expanding attrition research.

The Need for Expanded Attrition Research

Historically, attrition research has focused on the observable roles of special education teachers and attempted to parse out the external factors that influence an educator's decision to leave the field. This focus on external factors and observable skills perpetuates a techno-rationale view of special education (Hildenbrand & Arndt, 2016) and fails to account for the meaningful ways in which experienced teachers make sense of their roles and work in solidarity with their students. To better counter these historical deficit narratives, we need to learn more about the sense making of experienced, experienced teachers who remain in the field as outlined by Roegman et al. (2018).

Beyond the Observable Role of Special Education Teachers

Previous research has highlighted the external facets of a special education teachers' role such as the need teach a broad array of content, including academic, social, adaptive, and behavioral skills (Williams et al., 2015). Secondary special educators are also responsible for teaching vocational skills and providing transitional services (Wigle & Wilcox, 2003). The

amount of paperwork is extensive, including preparing students for state assessments (Conderman & Katsiyannis, 2002) and writing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), Functional Behavioral Assessments (FBAs), Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs), and evaluations (Williams et al., 2015). The legal requirements of special education also make special educators more susceptible to lawsuits, due process proceedings, or reprimand from administrators, which can increase overall job stress (Williams et al., 2015). Additionally, special education teachers are required to manage problem behavior, facilitate inclusion, and align teaching to grade-level content across multiple grades. Further complicating their roles, special education teachers must adapt to a wide range of teaching situations, such as varying (dis)ability categories, content (e.g. academic, vocational, life skills, etc.), and settings (e.g. resource, self-contained, inclusion, etc.; Wasburn-Moses, 2009). While this research illuminates the various external tasks required from special education teachers, it does little to shed light on the inner workings, or sense making, of these teachers and their students.

Emerging studies provide snapshots into the lives of teachers working with students who have IDD showing the complexity of these educators' emotional response to their jobs (Roegman et al., 2018; Ruppar, Neeper, & Dalsen, 2016). For instance, Roegman et al. (2018) found that, pre-service teachers working with students who have IDD reported feeling *extraordinary* because they had a distinct skill set that allowed them to work more successfully with students who required specially designed instruction when compared with their general education teacher peers. Roegman et al.'s participants also reported feeling *marginalized* based on how their students and they were excluded on a routine basis. By excluding children with IDD, districts inadvertently promote feelings of depersonalization within teachers because administrators signal a societal view that children with IDD cannot learn despite a growing body

of literature indicating the benefits of inclusion for general and special education students (McDonnell, Mathot-Buckner, & Thorson, 2001; Roegman et al., 2018).

In another example by Ruppar et al., (2016), educators of students with IDD expressed internal struggles with their own skills as a teacher due to the incremental progress of their students' learning. This was especially the case when administrators evaluated their skills and student progress using general education teacher tools (Ruppar et al., 2016). Findings from these studies are a step toward listening more deeply to individual teacher experiences in an attempt to better understand how teachers engage in sense making in their positions. Furthermore, specifically understanding experienced teachers who remain committed to the field could help shed light as to ways in which educators navigate their complex roles (Ruppar, Roberts, & Olson, 2017).

Experienced Special Education Teachers

Reducing special education teacher attrition will take more than studying the failures of the education system, rather studies must investigate what *is* working in the field to provide more answers to fill the current literature gap. A small, but growing body of research investigates character traits and dispositions of experienced special education teachers working with students who have IDD. Throughout the literature, there is often the distinction made between expert and novice teachers. Having years of experience doesn't necessarily denote that someone has gained expertise in their field (Stough & Palmer, 2003). Ruppar, Roberts, and Olson (2014) explained that expert teachers have an undeniable "presence" (p. 244). In Ruppar et al.'s (2014) study, participants described a feeling or sense that an observer could recognize in a special education teacher who has expert qualities within moments of entering the classroom. Ruppar et al. goes on to argue that colleagues, parents, and administrators sense this expertise. It is the job of

researchers to decipher and tease out those qualities that explain how these expert teachers operate, in regard to both observable actions and internal sensemaking.

Findings from the literature on experienced IDD teachers suggest that these individuals develop a set of skills and personality traits that expand well beyond the ability to engage in systematic instruction and academics (e.g. usually the focus of mainstream attrition literature; Ruppar et al., 2017). Additional skills include but are not limited to engaging in advocacy (Howell et al., 2005), individualizing and adapting curricula (Urbach et al., 2015), developing and maintaining collegial relationships (Douglas, Chapin, & Nolan, 2015), eliciting high student engagement (Howell et al., 2005), demonstrating behavior and classroom management (Keeffe & De George-Walker, 2010; Stough et al., 2003), and exhibiting professional leadership (Douglas et al., 2015; Howell et al., 2005). Moreover, experienced special education teachers working with students who have IDD exhibit personality traits that include having high expectations (Keefe et al., 2010), demonstrating positivity in regard to student outcomes (Ruppar et al., 2017), showing flexibility and creativity (Howell et al., 2005), and maintaining a commitment to continually improving their teaching practice (Keeffe et al., 2010). This literature suggests that there is much more to a special education teachers' role than whether individuals are capable of providing instruction in the classroom; this literature suggests that in addition to their instructional skills, their identity as an educator also matters.

Teacher Identity Tensions

An individuals' identity is not static, rather it is a malleable and dynamic process, susceptible to discursive powers (Alsup, 2018; Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain, 1998; Lasky, 2005). Teachers construct and deconstruct their identities throughout their careers, starting as early as their student teaching experiences (Alsup, 2018; Britzman, 1992). Given how attrition

research focuses on teachers' observable roles, it is critical to emphasize that an identity cannot be assigned like a list of job tasks, rather a teacher must consent to their identity (Britzman, 1992). The process of developing teacher identity includes how each individual defines their own identity to themselves and others (Lasky, 2005). This identity may be shaped by their student teaching experience (Alsup, 2018), institutional normative standards (Britzman, 1992), and political contexts, especially school reform (Lasky, 2005). The power of outside sources to influence teachers' identity leads to tension between what researchers refer to as their sense of authority and their vulnerability (Alsup, 2018; Britzman, 1992; Naraian, 2010; Roegman et al., 2018). Authority refers to a teacher's freedom to make decisions without hesitation (Alsup, 2018), while vulnerability represents situations where teachers feel a lack of control over factors influencing their immediate context (Lasky, 2005).

Special education teachers working with students who have IDD are especially susceptible to feeling influenced by outside sources because school districts routinely uphold ableist policies which position students with (dis)abilities as *others*, both figuratively and literally placing them outside of the general education realm into self-contained spaces (Leonardo et al., 2011; Siuty 2019a). Special education teachers working in these exclusionary settings may experience collegial isolation from other teachers resulting in increased rates of burnout (Bettini, Cheyney, Wang, & Leko, 2015; Schlichte, Yssel, & Merbler, 2005). While these special educators lack control over their students' basic needs (e.g. inclusion in mainstream contexts; Kurth, Morningstar, & Kozleski, 2014), contrastingly their job assigns them leadership roles such as managing other adults (i.e. paraprofessionals) within their classrooms (Ruppar et al., 2017). This is an example of how special education teachers are expected to have an

authoritative role over their paraprofessional staff members in their classrooms while being vulnerable as to whether or not they are allowed to teach students alongside non-(dis)abled peers.

Arguably, even when special education teachers receive placements in coteaching models, these educators are positioned as outsiders when compared to general education teacher peers (Naraian, 2010; Roegman, et al., 2018). Naraian (2010) found her participants struggled in co-teaching relationships because the special education teachers' identity shifted from being an authority to more of a support role similar to a paraprofessional. For example, the general education teacher claimed all academic subject matter as *belonging to herself*, not allowing the special education teacher to provide instruction on these topics despite being qualified to do so (Naraian, 2010). In response, Naraian argues that even coteaching models are not truly *inclusive* for students with (dis)abilities, rather they perpetuate oppressive normative standards upheld by the education system. Roegman et al. (2018) found similar tensions expressed by their pre-service teacher participants who described student teaching with words such as "discouraging," "frustrating," and "hopeless" (p. 302). This was the result of school norms which perpetuated feelings of being stigmatized due to being associated with special education, whether as a student or teacher. In coteaching relationships, the majority of participants reported lacking collaboration with general education teachers and expressed an unequal power dynamic (Roegman et al., 2018). In both of these brief examples, pre- and in-service special education teachers' identities are influenced by outsiders, namely other educators and administrators upholding systems of oppression especially in regard to ableism.

In addition to an identity as a special education teacher, the intersection of a teacher's

race plays a role. Students of Color[2] are becoming the majority in public school populations across the country while the teaching force remains predominantly white (Jackson, 2018). While policy makers aim to mitigate this divide by diversifying the teaching force, Jackson (2018) points out that all teachers (white teachers and teachers of Color) would benefit from developing socially just and critically conscious teaching stances. However, often teachers who are white and non-(dis)abled are not aware of their access to whiteness as property (DiAngelo, 2018). Whiteness as a property refers to the way in which individuals with access to the social capital of whiteness experience privilege in the world around them (Frankenberg, 1993). Often when individuals are steeped in their own whiteness, they are (un)aware[3] that their whiteness plays a role in their daily lives because they are part of the dominate Eurocentric, white, non-(dis)abled population (DiAngelo, 2018; Frankenberg, 1993). White individuals are socialized to view racism as a simplistic series of isolated behaviors enacted by people considered unethical (Berg & Simon, 2013). In response to a fear of being considered racist, many white people avoid acknowledging a person's race when they should actually do the opposite (Berg & Simon, 2013). Berg et al. (2013) suggests that helping white people to develop a racial identity, including an understanding of the role whiteness plays in their own lives, is the only way to truly interrupt racism. As teachers develop their identity as special education teachers, they need to consider

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2 I am following Annamma, Jackson, & Morrison (2016) choice to capitalize Black and Children of Color while not capitalizing white in order to uphold marginalized populations and dismantle the dominance of *whiteness* within current cultural contexts. As outline by Kohli et al. (2016), the term "of Color" encompasses people descending from African, Asian, indigenous, Latina/o, Middle Eastern, and Pacific Islander backgrounds.
3 The term (un)aware is used to call out the ways in which people who are white engage in white fragility claiming white innocence because they did not engage in perpetuating systems of oppression intentionally (DiAngelo, 2018). By separating "un" from "aware" with parenthesis, I'm highlighting the ways that individuals inadvertently hold up racial, classist, and ableist hierarchies and should be held accountable for their actions regardless of intent.

how their whiteness plays a role in their work, especially in regard to working with children who may be multiply marginalized.

Student Identity

Not only does research need to investigate teacher identity, but student identity as well. Students with IDD are frequently grouped together under a “disabled” category, ignoring the various dimensions of their being which often involve multiple marginalization. Special education teachers working with students who have IDD must be aware of the multiple axes of oppression their students may face daily including, but not limited to (a) ableism (Leonardo et al., 2011), (b) racism (Artiles, 2013), (c) communication bias (Erevelles, 2018; Bellucci & Nolan, 2018), (d) classism (Irvin, McBee, Boyd, Hume, & Odom, 2012), and (e) politics of appearance (Taylor, 2015). Teachers working with students who have IDD and other marginalized identity markers have resisted this exclusive thinking by leveraging discourse that positions themselves as *us* [individuals with (dis)abilities and their advocates] against *them* [non-(dis)abled students and their general education teachers] (Erevelles, 2018). The *us* or *them* terminology can be heard across the country among policy makers, administrators, parents, teachers, and even students which constructs a sense of *otherness* for children and their families (Lalvani, 2015). The use of *us* or *them* terminology is problematic because it further promotes exclusionary ideals that children with (dis)abilities are different than mainstream populations. Rather than continuing to engage in the *us/them* phenomenon, white non-(dis)abled teachers should reposition themselves as working in solidarity alongside their students, collectively advocating for inclusionary opportunities and practices.

Working alongside students, in solidarity, is in direct contrast to the extant literature framing of special education teacher advocacy (Lalvani, 2015). Previous research in this area

frames advocacy as speaking *for* students with IDD, despite not being able to fully understand the lived experiences of their students and their students' families (Lalvani, 2015). Reframing the special education teachers' role as working *alongside* students may utilize these teachers' strengths (e.g., savvy and ingenuity) to provide their students with a platform for acknowledging and addressing the systematic racism (Artiles, 2013), ableism (Leonardo et al., 2011), intellectual discrimination, communication bias (Erevelles, 2018), and classism (Irvin et al., 2012) they currently face. Without acknowledging and addressing these multiple axes of oppression, feeble attempts at liberation of individuals with IDD will continue to fall short.

Theoretical Frameworks

The purpose of this study is to better understand why and how experienced special education teachers of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) develop strong teaching identities, which serve as protective factors in maintaining longevity in the field while also counteracting historically oppressive, deficit minded narratives about their roles and their students. Furthermore, a goal is to understand how these teachers work *in solidarity* with their students, as opposed to *on behalf of* their students. This study will draw on multiple theories to frame, explore, and discuss the aforementioned goals including identity development (Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998), Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit; Annamma et al., 2013; Annamma et al., 2016; Erevelles et al., 2010; Artiles. 2016; & Reid & Knight, 2006), and the ideological system of *smartness* (Leonardo et al., 2011).

The theory of identity development as outlined by Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) will be used to explore how identities are not static, but rather a dynamic process which must balance socially imposed worlds and the ability of an individual to act as a free agent within these worlds. To clarify, Holland et al. (1998), suggest blending two theories of thought:

(1) people's lives are shaped by history, society, and culture, but also, (2) individuals have the ability to develop their own identities outside of what is given to them, which demonstrates agency within their worlds. Similarly, teachers navigate the tensions between the roles they are given (e.g., by district administrators, the media, and society as a whole) and their own ever-evolving self-identity (Alsup, 2018).

As teachers develop their own identities, they must also better understand the identity of their students with IDD. Students with disabilities may be multiply marginalized based on ability, race, class, and gender (Annamma et al., 2013; Gillborn, Rollock, Vincent, & Bell). Disabilities Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) is the study of the intersectionality of race and (dis)ability, which was born from the Critical Race Theory movement (Annamma et al., 2013). Keeping race and (dis)ability separate does not accurately represent the experiences of individuals who are multiply marginalized experiencing both oppression as an individual with (dis)abilities and a person of Color (Bell 2004; 2011).

Individuals with (dis)abilities have been oppressed throughout history with stigmas that label them non-normal and thereby defective or handicapped (Goffman, 2017). Furthermore, there is a disproportionate representation in regard to Children of Color in special education (In order for schools to resist and dismantle policies which promote legal segregation of often multiply marginalized students from school (e.g., through the use of suspensions) and eventually society (e.g., through incarceration), all involved parties must consider expanding beyond narrow medical models of (dis)abilities, where curative treatments targeting deficiencies are the main focus. For example, students with (dis)abilities may be subjected to treatments which include taking medication and receiving instruction outside of general education settings despite the fact that research does not demonstrate benefits to these exclusionary methods (Kurth et al., 2014).

Instead of adopting medical models, the education system should aim to better understand the social model, which recognizes how (dis)ability is, in fact, the result of cultural and historical phenomena where non-(dis)abled people systematically and routinely oppress those individuals with (dis)abilities (Shakespeare, 2017).

Finally, I will employ the ideological system of *smartness*, examining how *smartness* is used as property which provides those with access to it advantages throughout society. Assumptions about abilities and *smartness* oppress individuals with (dis)abilities**.** *Smartness* is a form of social capital which the education system creates, defines, and assesses allowing only the most privileged students (i.e., white, Eurocentric, middle-to-upper class, and able males) access to this currency (Morgan, 1996). Morgan outlines how the education system develops what constitutes knowledge and *smartness* through curriculum and evaluations that force children to internalize these given norms using tests, papers, and dissertations. Leonardo et al. (2011) described *smartness* as a relational system much like race, where *whiteness* only exists through the disparagement of people of Color[4], *smartness* only endures because some individuals are deemed (dis)abled, forever damaged and even disposable.

Problem Statement

Given that the role of special education teachers working with students who have IDD is extensive and reaches far beyond the narrow scope of delivering instruction, it is important to investigate why some teachers stay in the field despite high attrition levels. While emerging findings suggest that experienced special education teachers have certain skills and character traits (Ruppar et al., 2017), research has yet to delve deeper into the identities of special

4 I am following Annamma's (2016) choice to capitalize Black and Children of Color while not capitalizing white in order to uphold marginalized populations and dismantle the dominance of *whiteness* within current cultural contexts.

educators (e.g., often white non-(dis)abled females) in relationships to the identities of children with IDD who may experience multiple marginalization. The participants in Roegman et al.'s (2018) study liken entering the teaching field as preparation for a proverbial war:

> Residents concluded their field placements with a sense of doubt, fear, and guilt, prepared to battle and having begun to internalize negative understanding of what it means to be a special education certified teacher. They did not live up to their own expectations of what special education-certified teachers can do; they experienced marginalization within schools and classrooms, which they feared would continue if they did not find the 'right' job; and they felt like being a special education-certified teacher meant going to war" (p. 309)

This statement is somewhat problematic since the teachers experienced distressing emotions based on the treatment of their students; however, they should not liken this discomfort to the marginalization the students themselves experience. What is commendable about this example is the participants' desire to resist exclusionary practices and seek job placements where they can best serve students with IDD in inclusive settings.

Traditionally, attrition research looks at teachers in isolation from their students while also only studying external factors such as a teachers' instructional capability. Furthermore, attrition studies often use a deficit lens, focusing on teachers who have left the field. The purpose of this research is to delve into the identity of experienced teachers who have stayed committed to working with students who have IDD for an extended period of time. As educators share their teaching identities, this research also aims to better understand how they navigate relationships with students who may be multiply marginalized and reflect on their own positionality in regard to both their identities and their students' identities. The questions guiding this research are:

How do experienced teachers of students with IDD:

- Talk about the ways that their teaching identities have and continue to evolve, including how they view themselves as educators
- Express how they navigate factors, such as key relationships and job responsibilities, across ecological systems (e.g. micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems) that uphold dominant systems of oppression

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This study aims to better understand the inner workings of experienced special education teachers working with students who have Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD), who remain committed to the field, leading long and productive careers. This study focuses on experienced special education teachers who demonstrate a commitment to the field (Ruppar et al., 2015; Ruppar et al., 2017). Ruppar et al.'s (2017) study investigated special education teachers ($N = 11$) working with students who have IDD, and found that experienced teachers demonstrated four core *skills* (1) advocacy for students, (2) systematic instruction including academics, (3) individualization and adaptation of curriculum, and (3) creation and maintaining of strong collegial relationships. Experienced teachers also exhibited four specific *qualities* including, (1) high expectations of students, (2) positivity in regard to attitudes and actions, (3) flexibility and creativity, and (4) dedication to continual improvement of practice. Ruppar et al. (2015) and Ruppar et al. (2017) provide indicators for determining a teachers' expert status.

Moreover, this study also endeavors to explore how these educators make sense of their position in the context of school systems which uphold dominant normative narratives, often perpetuating ableism and racism. This chapter will review (a) the historical trends in special education teacher attrition research as organized across Brownell et al.'s, (1993) ecological model, (b) what interventions have been developed to target special education teacher attrition, (c) how educators form their teaching identities based on various internal and external factors, and (d) the importance of understanding the identity of students with IDD. While the majority of attrition research focuses on observable instructional skills, traits and characteristics, this literature review aims to shed light on the importance of the inner workings of special education teachers and their students with IDD. This literature review will conclude with supporting

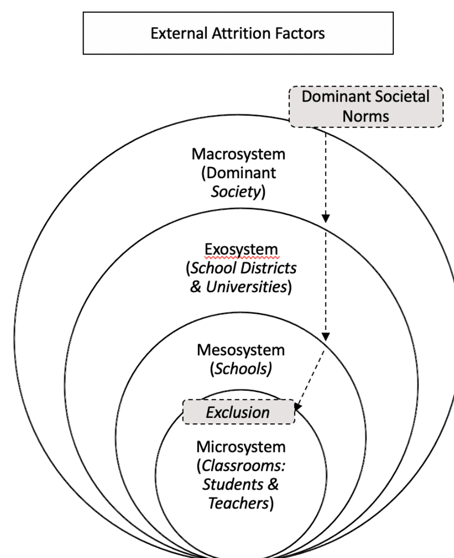
theoretical frameworks including teacher identity theory and Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit).

Historical Trends in Special Education Teacher Attrition Research

For decades, researchers have focused on observable factors influencing special education teachers' decisions to leave the field from the individual teacher level (e.g. teachers' self-efficacy, preparation programs, etc.) to systems level issues (e.g. paperwork, legal requirement, administration support levels, etc.; Cancio et al., 2018). Brownell and Smith (1993) developed a conceptual framework, based on Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological model, to organize the predictors of special education teacher attrition into four nested, interrelated systems as shown in Figure 1: (a) macrosystem, (b) exosystem, (c) mesosystem, and (d) microsystem.

Figure 1

Ecological Model of Attrition Factors as Influenced by Dominant Societal Norms



Note. Adapted from "Understanding special education teacher attrition: A conceptual model and implications for teacher educators," by Mary T. Brownell & Stephen W. Smith, 1993, *Teacher*

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The overarching *macrosystem* accounts for economic and political ideologies. I theorize that while not stated specifically by Brownell et al., the *macrosystem* also encompasses beliefs of the dominant culture, including systematic racism and ableism. Next, the *exosystem* includes systems like school districts and universities with contributing factors such as socioeconomic conditions and district and state policies. Going another step deeper into the system, the *mesosystem* incorporates the interpersonal relationships between the special education teachers and their colleagues/administrators throughout the school. Lastly, at the center of the model is the *microsystem,* referring to the individual teacher level where classroom settings and interactions with students, job assignment, and class size have substantial influence. While Brownell et al. (1993) speak of the individual teacher, they are referring to observable instructional traits and actions, not individual educators' inner thoughts, feelings, or emotional response to the job.

Often research focuses on the effects of how dominant societal norms play out as children with IDD are excluded from mainstream settings within the classroom (e.g., microsystem) or school building (e.g., mesosystem). Contrastingly, I propose that the normative center of schools actually originates in the macrosystem level based on society's ableist assumptions and practices dictating what is to be considered normal (Artiles, 2013). As depicted in Figure 1, these oppressive deficit beliefs around the ability of individuals with (dis)abilities originates at the macrosystem level, trickling down throughout district policies (i.e., exosystem), school building practices (i.e., mesosystem), and the greatest impact is felt within the classroom (i.e.,

microsystem). What we know little about and researchers have failed to investigate, are the ways in which these dominant societal norms resulting in exclusionary practices impact the inner workings of special education teachers.

First, I will summarize how previous researchers have examined observable attrition factors as organized across macro-, exo-, meso-, and micro- microsystems. As I do so, I will argue that even the challenges considered at the micro- (e.g., individual teacher) level are still predominantly observable skills teachers demonstrate and do not account for their professional identities. Second, I will summarize the research on interventions designed to reduce attrition including mentorship, induction, coaching, and professional development, demonstrating how these interventions narrowly focus on observable teacher skillsets. Lastly, I will discuss the need for attrition research to expand beyond the observable competencies of special education teachers. There is a gap in the attrition literature in regard to how the macrosystem affects all layers of the education system, especially an individual special education teacher's sensemaking and response to a system upholding racism and ableism.

Macrosystem: Dominant Society

In Brownell et al.'s (1993) model the most under researched areas are not only the inner workings of the teacher, but also the very outer macrosystem which accounts for cultural beliefs and ideologies. Given the lack of studies exploring this area as it relates to attrition, Brownell et al. were only able to hypothesize that certain societal constructs influenced educational policy and thereby, interactions of teachers and students in their workplace. They suggested perceptions of learners mattered, as well as the perceptions about teachers and schools. Since as early as 1986, Ashton and Webb called to attention how public pressure to increase tests scores reduced teachers' self-esteem. More recently, Roegman et al. (2018) found that preservice special

education teachers continue to be influenced by how media depicts (dis)ability and their roles as educators. Furthermore, education research and policymakers fail to take into account the very nature of the dominant normative centers of schools, which uphold ableist and racist ideologies. In fact, Miller, Brownell, and Smith (1999) collapsed their model, excluding the macrosystem in a later study. However, truly understanding the education system's macro- level is critical to resisting dominant normative centers of school. Researchers must strive to better understand the history of oppressive practices regarding the legal segregation of students not meeting normative standards, the lack of critical inclusion, and the ways in which society views *disability* through medical versus social models.

A history of oppression. Historically, individuals perceived to fall short of often unstated dominant cultural benchmarks (e.g., *whiteness*, middle-to-upper class socioeconomic standing, and ability) are considered *others*, determined to be abnormal (Annamma, Conner, & Ferri, 2013; Reid & Knight, 2006). Furthermore, school systems position teachers and administrators as judges themselves, determining each individuals' level of acceptability as a student through a Eurocentric and ableist lens, resulting in the disproportionality of minoritized[5] students receiving special education labels such as Learning Disability (LD), Intellectual Disability (ID), or Emotional Behavior Disorder (EBD; Annnamma et al., 2013). Overdiagnosis of students from non-dominant backgrounds results from embedded racial and linguistic ideologies that promote systematic discrimination and uphold particular ways of being as acceptable forms of *smartness* (Reid et al., 2006).

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[5] The term *minoritized* (in contrast to "minority") describes how current dominant cultures oppress groups of individuals falling outside of white, heterosexual, non-(dis)abled, male normative standards (Smith, 2016). For example, Smith (2016) explains that while schools are labeled as having a majority of the population be "minority students," these children continue to face social and economic barriers which in fact minoritize them.

Children are not born into special education, nor do they get placed directly in self-contained classrooms upon enrollment (unless otherwise diagnosed at previous schools). Instead, educators (predominately white non-(dis)abled women; Billingsley et al., 2017; Taie, Goldring, & Spiegelman, 2018;) are given the role of acting as judges referring students deemed outside of the normative standard to an evaluation system (i.e. the jury) which subjectively diagnoses, labels, and sorts children into various categories of (dis)ability (Reid et al., 2006). There are 13 (dis)ability categories, with Harry and Klingner (2014) arguing that of these there are four "judgement" categories which do not require biological data, but rather clinical judgement, (a) Intellectual Disability (ID), (b) Specific Learning Disability (SLD), (c) Emotional Behavioral Disability (EBD), and (d) Speech and Language Impairment (SLI). The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) collected and analyzed data focusing on these categories demonstrating overwhelming over-representation of Black children, specifically finding that Black students were 2.75 times likely to be designated as having ID and 2.28 times as likely to receive an EBD diagnosis (Harry et al., 2014). It is alarming that the diagnostic categories requiring subjective analysis are those with disproportionate numbers of students of Color.

Legal segregation. The fact that children of Color are more than three times more likely to be labeled with ID and two times as likely to receive the diagnosis of EBD is evidence that a perceived lack of ability (as defined through a white, Eurocentric lens) and non-dominant racial background intersect within the education system, which deeply wounds our children and their futures (Annamma et al., 2013). As it stands, the special education referral system allows for the legal segregation of students based on non-dominant racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds (Annamma et al., 2013), especially considering that the judge (e.g. administrators and school psychologists) and jury (e.g., teachers, Individual Education Plan (IEP) team members, and the

general public) are often representatives of the dominant white, Eurocentric, and middle-to-upper class non-(dis)abled population (Reid et al., 2006). Special education teams suggest that (dis)ability diagnosis are “facts” when the majority of diagnosis labels are actually subjective social constructs (Reid et al., 2006). Reid et al. (2006) explain how the medical model of special education indicates that specially designed instruction in restrictive settings improves “deficits” for minoritized students, when in actuality there is little evidence to suggest that these placements enhance long-term outcomes for marginalized students (Reid et al., 2006).

This process of exclusion starts from a very young age. For example, Collins (2016) describes her experiences as a white non-(dis)abled woman raising a son who is biracial, self-identifying as Brown, biracial, Black, or African American, within the education system. As early as preschool, her son was segregated from literacy instruction to clean tables after being labeled “just too active” (p. 196). As he moved through early elementary school grades, white women continued scrutinizing her child through *ability profiling*, attempting to label him as deficient thereby justifying exclusion from the learning community. While Collins (2016), a white non-(dis)abled woman, resisted a special education placement for her child, she recognized that other Black mothers might not be able to yield this privilege. While the education system is supposed to care for students, especially those who are vulnerable, public institutions continue failing to meet basic education and social developmental needs for individuals falling outside of normative standards (e.g., white, Eurocentric, male, and non-(dis)abled; Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010).

Critical inclusion. After decades of segregation, these dominant ideologies are pervasive across school contexts placing children outside normative standards into categories of non-(dis)abled, non-white, and non-binary (Baglieri, Bejoia, Broderick, Connor, & Valle, 2011;

Kurth et al., 2014; Siuty, 2019a; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013). Pushing back against legalized segregation requires teacher agency and overall disruption of oppressive systems (Gourd, 2018). In the chapter, *Teachers, Power and Agency*, Gourd (2018) concludes that despite the complexities of teacher agency, it is possible for educators to navigate macro and micro-sociological contexts engaging in agency within contested and ambiguous spaces on a daily basis. Critical inclusion seeks to transform these systems of educational spaces from the oppressive general and special education settings to spaces for *all* students (Siuty, 2019a). Teachers first encounter the segregation and *othering* of students with (dis)abilities at the university level as special and general education teachers are rarely brought together to collaborate, receiving pre-service instruction in either a special education or general education setting with little overlap (Siuty, 2019b). In response, Waitoller et al. (2013) suggested that school districts and universities partner to create a common vision and purpose in order to weave the missions of both institutions together into a cohesive effort. This idea faces barriers as Waitoller et al. explains how each organization is bound by their own traditions and ideas of best practice with competing senses of authority, also referred to as superiority (p. 38). The lack of inclusion at the preservice level will be discussed in the subsequent *exosystem* section. One proposed way to break down systems of oppression is with a critically inclusive lens. Siuty (2019a) defines critical inclusion and how it can be used to push against these dominant normative standards, perpetuating ableism and racism:

> Critical inclusion critiques ableism as a system of oppression that defines a normative center of schools that uses dominant conceptions of normalcy and difference in order to unevenly distribute access and power…Critical inclusion then represents a social justice project to transform educational systems through continuous cycle of analyzing,

disrupting, and restructuring the social processes that produce inequality (p. 1033).

At a pre- and in-service level, critical inclusion is one way to help educators conceptualize and push against invisible forces of oppression and power dynamics imbedded in the special education system (Siuty, 2019b). Until we are able to dismantle the macrosystem with dominant normative standards, special education students will continue to be denied access to spaces that should be for all students. This overall rational for segregation stems from a Western medical model of (dis)ability.

Perceptions of (dis)ability. The Western medical model defines (dis)ability as an individually-held deficiency to be fixed, rather than a socially constructed perception based on oppressive notions of normalcy (Annamma et al., 2013). While high-incidence (dis)abilities are considered to be potentially remediated, contrastingly students with IDD are thought broken or not worth fixing (Leonardo et al., 2011). When it comes to arguments promoting inclusion for *all* students with (dis)abilities, researchers must prove that students with IDD can, in fact, learn skills related to community contexts, benefit from inclusion opportunities with peers who are perceived as typically developing, and achieve state standards as adopted in alternative assessments (Courtade, Spooner, Browder, & Jimenez, 2012; Kurth et al., 2014). Furthermore, in order to gain rights to basic curriculum, researchers must present studies demonstrating that students with IDD can learn math and science (Browder et al., 2010), as well as literacy skills (Simpson, Spencer, Button, & Rendon, 2007). All of these academic benchmarks are expectations rooted in oppressive notions of *normalcy* and *normal functioning.*

Exosystem: The School District and Universities

Overarching dominate cultural norms and beliefs also play out in the exosystem which is where school districts enact policies influenced by societal views of (dis)ability, such as (a)

teacher education at the university level (Ruppar, Allcock, and Gonsier-Gerdin, 2017), (b) professional development, (c) district mandated teacher evaluations (Ruppar, Roberts, & Olson, 2017), and (d) working conditions including, access to curriculum, paperwork, and teacher salaries (Boe, Bobbitt, Cooke, Whitener, & Webber, 1997;Tyler & Bruner, 2014; Williams et al., 2015).

Dominant societal beliefs that individuals with (dis)abilities should be remediated into special education programs begins at the pre-service level where general and special education teachers are separated from each other for distinctly different training (Blanton, Pugach, & Boveda, 2017). Emerging research suggests that a lack of collaboration among teachers is at the root of exclusionary practices for students with (dis)abilities (Robinson, 2017; Blanton et al., 2017). For example, Robinson (2017) suggests that the argument for inclusion of students with (dis)abilities in mainstream settings begins at the pre-service educator level where dominant normative structures separate out special and general education teachers from the beginning of their careers. Resisting and breaking down dominant normative standards across schools must include shedding light on the ways in which teachers' practices are shaped to perpetuate and uphold ableist and racist structures.

Pre-service experiences: Universities within school districts. A teachers' ability to collaborate and work within the context of a school starts developing as early as their pre-service experience. A unique aspect of the teaching field is that pre-service educators spend weeks to months (depending on the certification requirement) in schools completing practicums under mentor teachers (West & Hudson, 2010). Emerging research suggests that pre-service teachers develop their professional identities during this time including sense-making and agency (Alsup, 2018; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2018). Ruohotie-Lyhty (2018) explains that the student teachers' identity

is influenced by their school environment, whereas they may come to the classroom with beliefs, ideas, and previous experience, but relationships within the school context may challenge student teachers to change these beliefs for better or worse.

In the field of special education, pre-service teachers are segregated from their general education peers in both university settings and practicum sites. Blanton et al. (2017) investigated educational reforms dating back to 1970 in order to find those opportunities for general and special education to intersect, providing all students with and without (dis)abilities access to highly trained teachers capable of helping all types of learners. They found four major factors that contributed to separation in general education and special education teacher preparation, (a) policy, (b) funding, (c) timing, and (d) norms of separation. At the exostystem level, *policy* barriers include missed opportunities to share curricular spaces enabling pre-service teachers to gain expertise across a wide range of content rather than isolating special education teachers to focus on one social marker of diversity – (dis)ability.

Despite continued low achievement (as defined by dominant culture's normative standards) of students with intersection identities, general education peers are expected to achieve pedagogical expertise mostly based on content knowledge with limited instruction in how to support learners with varying abilities (Blanton et al., 2017). Blanton et al. (2017) explain how *funding* has been used to prioritize isolated social markers of identity privileging general education programs over special education, diminishing opportunities for diverse communities with shared collaborative leadership. Blanton et al. explains how reforms such as the 2001 revision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and No Child Left Behind opened the door to collaboration between special and general education teachers with mandates for special education teachers to receive *highly qualified* status. However, the door was shut as funding for

programs were awarded separately so that special education teachers worked in isolation towards this goal rather than alongside general educators (Blanton et al., 2017)

Timing refers to the trend for policymakers to only think of including special educators at the end of development, if at all. Blanton et al. suggests that new pre-service teacher education initiatives should include common discourse during the outset of planning, including all diverse communities. Lastly, *norms of separation* resulted from decades of missed opportunities for a comprehensive equity agenda which could envelop *all* pre-service teachers in learning communities – general and special education teachers together. Instead, administrators at the university and district levels continue to define educators' knowledge in opposition of one another rather than acknowledging how their skills and expertise overlap.

Professional development. Once a teacher leaves their university programs, school districts take responsibility for additional training, often leaning on professional development (Thornton, Peltier, & Medina, 2007). Most inservice teaching contracts require ongoing professional development (Kennedy, 2016). Kennedy (2016) argues that historically, professional development was measured based on observable characteristics such as content, program duration, intensity, or the use of techniques (e.g., online versus in-person coaching). In order to better understand the theories of professional development and thereby assess which professional development strategies are more effective, Kennedy categorized professional development into four categories: (a) the *prescription* model where teachers are dictated content and expected to implement strategies in their classroom without input; (b) an *assistance* framework where teachers are presented with multiple approaches and allowed to make strategic instructional decisions; (c) an *insight* focus where opportunities are created to allow teachers to come to understandings based on their experiences with students; and (d) building a

knowledgebase, as often supported by universities who assume that with more knowledge, teachers will improve their practice. Brownell and Leko (2018) applied Kennedy's framework for professional development to special educator research finding and found that studies relied heavily on the prescriptive professional development approach. Brownell and Leko (2018) call on researchers to make their theories of educator learning explicit so that the field of special education can have greater confidence in the effectiveness of professional development programs on teacher and student outcomes. Brownell et al.'s (2018) findings reflect the continued failure of researchers to consider the inner workings of special education teachers, instead hyper focusing on whether or not they perform observable skills. In so doing, questions as to the ability of teachers to generalize and sustain professional development approaches are left unanswered (Brownell et al., 2018).

District mandated teacher evaluations. Despite the complex nature of a special educator's role, policymakers require special education teachers to be evaluated based on tools developed for general education teachers (Ruppar, Roberts, & Olson, 2017). These tools are lacking in their ability to reflect standards for quality instruction, especially when working with students who have low-incidence disabilities (Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014; Jones & Brownell, 2014). Without appropriate evaluation measures in place, administrators run the risk of hurting both special education teachers and their students. Scoring special education teachers lower on evaluations could lead to increased burnout for a population of educators who have historically high rates of attrition (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2008). Also, by using inappropriate guidelines for what constitutes best practices for students with disabilities, school districts might inadvertently encourage special educators to use methods that are not shown to be effective for their particular population of students.

While there is some overlap in general knowledge and expertise all teachers need to have, there are also significant differences between highly effective instructional practices for general and special education teachers when applying evaluation criteria. Emerging research on alternative teacher evaluations for special educators has promising results (Jones et al., 2014). School systems need to use evaluation systems for special education teachers to improve both teacher practice and student outcomes, while ensuring that school districts choose those systems which fit and appropriately address the various job responsibilities as a special educator (Jones et al., 2014).

Working conditions. While research focuses heavily on the individual teacher as a conduit for staying or leaving the field, a growing body of literature cites a teachers' work environment as a substantial contributor to attrition. Special education teachers are accountable for an exorbitant amount of paperwork (Conderman et al., 2002; Williams et al., 2015) and serve students across multiple grades (Berry et al., 2012). In Williams et al.'s survey of special education teachers ($N = 215$), there was a positive correlation between burnout and the amount of time spent completing paperwork. The extra time required by special educations to complete paperwork and plan for a wide-array of student needs is extensive (Griffin, 2009) and their salary is not commensurate with the workload (Billingsley et al., 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2003). Williams et al. points out that many teachers work second jobs in order to "make ends meet," adding to their job stress (p. 339). Despite an insufficient salary, teachers face classrooms lacking supplies (e.g., textbooks, consumables, computer software, and instructional materials), leaving them to personally purchase tools using their own money, or work without them (Kaufhold, Alvarez, & Arnold, 2006). Williams et al. (2015) notes that special education teachers are increasingly experiencing a loss of control in regard to making decisions about

instructional strategies, assessments, and curriculum. Conley and You's (2017) study found that administrate support levels influenced teachers' decisions to stay in the field, suggesting that high levels of administrative support may mitigate other job-related stress.

Mesosystem: The School

At the mesosystem level, poor school climate results in higher levels of teacher attrition (Billingsley et al., 2004; Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014; Lavian, 2012; Mathews, Rogers, and Youngs, 2017; McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004). Teachers working with students who have IDD are at greater risk for experiencing negative school climates as the self-contained model by definition leads to exclusionary working environments for students and their educators (Billingsley et al., 2004; Greenway, McCollow, Hudson, Peck, & Davis, 2013). Collaborating with and feeling a part of the school community is critical to the success of special education teachers (Griffin et al., 2009; Lavian, 2012; Miller et al., 1999). Greenway et al. (2013) found that teachers working with students who have IDD were more likely to feel detached from their schools and they reported limited access to supports such as curricula, school resources, and professional development. Mathews et al. (2017) found that early career teachers experienced stigma related to their job, especially as these educators advocated for inclusion opportunities. This stigma coupled with feeling not understood may lead to further feelings of isolation for early career teachers who are navigating their job requirements (Mathews et al., 2017).

While research demonstrates that negative school climate has a relationship with attrition, little is known about teachers who stay in the field and whether or not they happen to be in schools with positive school climates or they make sense of their school climate in other ways. Currently, research such as Lavian (2012), found that special education teachers (n = 62) and general education teachers (n = 62) indicated that the more unsupportive the school

organizational climate was perceived, the greater were the participants' feeling of stress and burnout. Billingsley et al. (2004) found that school climate was definitely related to a teachers' intention to stay in special education. In Hagaman and Casey's (2017) study of early career special education teachers (i.e. teachers in their first three years; $N = 18$), four of the participants reported intentions to transfer to a new school ($n = 2$) or change careers to become a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA; $n = 1$) and a counselor ($n = 1$). These participants cited school climate issues as their reasons for leaving their current positions, specifically politics and unspoken expectations without support. This demonstrates that a large component of school culture is the collaboration between special education teachers and other teachers, administrators, and staff in the building (Hagaman et al. 2017).

Implementing cooperation between general and special educators proves difficult when schools continue upholding dominant normative standards (Mathews et al., 2017). In a study of beginning special education teachers, Griffin et al., (2009) found when educators were placed in classrooms near general education settings, 70% of them reported positive feelings of accomplishment regarding communication and collaboration. Contrastingly, teachers ranked communication and collaboration poorly when placed in separate schools (24%), a portable or different classroom (27%), and in a special education wing (29%). Mathews et al. (2017) also noted that the burden for collaboration (e.g. coordinating services, schedules, and accommodations) often rests solely on the special education teachers. This extra level of responsibility requires additional efforts from special education teachers as they work to avoid conflict, maintaining positive rapport with general education colleagues. Griffin et al. (2009) suggests ensuring that first-year special education teachers collaborate with a diverse group of people rather than lean heavily on other special education teachers furthering feelings of

isolation. Conley et al. (2017) suggest having meetings across grade levels and special education teams. However, they note the importance of early career teachers upholding their own beliefs when working in collaborative settings. Tyler et al. (2014) calls for administrators to not only value the collaboration between special education teachers, but to allow decision-making to ensure the best outcomes for each students' needs.

Microsystem: Teachers and Their Students

The microsystem refers to factors at the individual teacher level including (a) teacher qualifications (McLeskey et al., 2004; Williams et al., 2015), (b) teacher characteristics (Billingsley, 2004), (c) student characteristics (Ruppar et al., 2016), and (d) teachers' feelings of self-efficacy (Dellinger, Bobbett, Olivier, & Ellett, C. D., 2008). Not surprisingly, the greatest body of attrition literature focuses on what is not working at the individual teacher level as opposed to investigating the oppressive dominant normative center of the education system. Thus, attrition interventions have historically focused on making special education teachers work harder to improve their skills, which may in advertently increase the demands on teachers and contribution to attrition.

Qualifications. In response to the shortage of special education teachers, policymakers have reduced requirements to gain certification (McLeskey et al., 2004), hired individuals from outside the education field (Williams et al., 2015), and allowed many to teach without a certificate (McLeskey & Ross, 2004), especially in high-poverty schools (Berry et al., 2012; Connelly & Graham, 2009; Mason-Williams & Gagnon, 2017). This tendency for schools with minoritized students to have less qualified teachers and higher attrition rates is referred to as teacher sorting (Mason-Williams et al., 2017). Borrowing from general education research, Mason-Williams et al. (2017) explained how educators are *sorted* unevenly with more qualified

teachers likely to take jobs in schools with low poverty, fewer minoritized populations, and less disciplinary concerns. Alarmingly, Mason-Williams (2017) found that in general education secondary contexts, only 10% of content teachers had a special education degree or certification. This makes inclusion for individuals with (dis)abilities at secondary levels unattainable as there are not enough special education teachers delegated to secondary settings. Overall, research suggests that teachers without appropriate credentials and training are more likely to leave the field as they are unprepared for the complexities of the job and more susceptible to burnout (Berry et al., 2012).

Moving beyond the pre-service qualifications, teachers in the field are unable to gain expertise if they are leaving the profession soon after teaching (McLeskey et al., 2008). This makes it difficult for early career educators to develop a repertoire of research-based teaching strategies, contributing to the research-to-practice gap (McLeskey et al., 2008). While researchers continue to emphasize the need for focused training in evidence-based practices, attending high-quality teacher preparation programs does not ensure retention as McLeskey et al.'s (2008) research demonstrates.

Teacher characteristics. Researchers have studied teacher characteristics when hypothesizing about teacher attrition, often demonstrating relationships between teacher characteristics and longevity in the special education field (Billingsley et al., 2004). For example, the younger and more inexperienced a special educator, the more likely they are to move schools or leave the field (Billingsley et al., 2004). Other personal factors influencing educators' decisions to stay or leave the field include (a) moving, (b) pregnancy, and (c) personal finances (e.g., teachers who provide the main income for a family are more likely to stay; Billingsley et al., 2004). While these characteristics highlight external teacher factors influencing attrition, they

do little to help researchers understand why some teachers with similar characteristics stay, while others leave.

Self-efficacy. In an attempt to consider what goes on internally with teachers, researchers have used self-efficacy as a measure of teacher characteristics and feelings (Dellinger et al., 2008). While self-efficacy is intended to gauge a teachers' feelings of instructional success, the emphasis remains focused on teachers' enactment of observable skills and student achievement. This becomes problematic when school systems are upholding dominant normative standards leaving teachers with narrow benchmarks for what delineates *student success*. By definition, self-efficacy refers to an individual's beliefs about his or her own ability to successfully perform specific tasks (Bandura, 1977). While many workers have specific jobs they complete, teachers are unique in that feelings of self-efficacy include students' performance as part of overall outcomes (Dellinger et al., 2008; Thomas, 2014). Dellinger et al. (2008) further defined teacher self-efficacy as, "Teachers' beliefs in their abilities to affect student performance" (p. 753). By including students in the definition of self-efficacy, Dellinger et al. introduced additional variables such as student characteristics, behavior, and student external factors (e.g. family life, ability level, and previous academic experiences).

Multiple studies have found that burnout is consistently negatively correlated with teachers' self-efficacy (Lee, Patterson, & Vega, 2011; Ruble, Usher, & McGrew, 2011; Sarçam and Sakiz, 2014). While measuring special education teacher self-efficacy is a step in the right direction - inward toward the teacher - self-efficacy surveys primarily emphasize teaching skills and student performance. In other words, self-efficacy could potentially uphold dominant normative narratives because first, researchers are in effect asking teachers if they feel successful as measured against district normative standards. Second, researchers are asking if teacher

performance influences students' ability to meet normative standards which uphold racism, classism, and ableism. Contrastingly, studies should explore the normative standards teachers face and how they make sense of the standards set for their students with (dis)abilities, especially as non-(dis)abled persons.

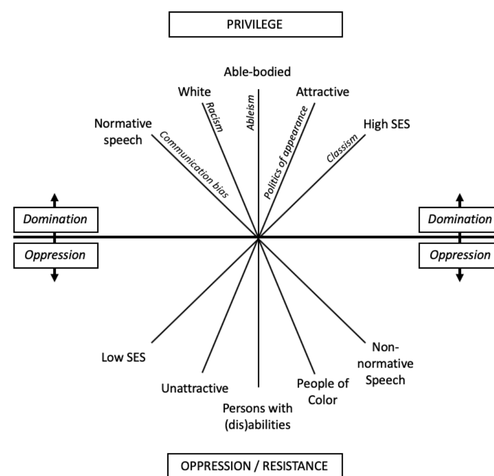
Student characteristics. Special education teachers adapt to a wide range of student characteristics, such as varying (dis)ability categories (e.g., Down syndrome, autism, intellectual disabilities, etc.), content (e.g., academic, vocational, life skills, etc.), and settings (e.g., self-contained or inclusion models; Wasburn-Moses, 2009). Overall, special education teachers are expected to have a wide array of skills in order to help a diverse group of students which can lead to role ambiguity, a factor shown to increase attrition (Wasburn-Moses, 2009). For example, Browder and Spooner (2011) identify eight indicators of high-quality education programs designed to address the needs of individuals with IDD: (1) access to inclusion, (2) connections between home and school, (3) a collaborative school teams, (4) high-quality systematic instruction, (5) behavior management, (6) self-determination, (7) academic skills, and (8) functional skills. In a study by Ruppar et al. (2016), researchers identified two roles of special education teachers, program management (e.g., supervising paraprofessionals and writing IEPs) and instructional delivery (e.g., directly providing systematic instruction and support with medical, physical, and health needs of students). In their study, special education teachers (N = 104) working with students who have IDD responded to surveys about perceptions of their preparedness for the job. These participants reported feeling most prepared for IEP paperwork and team collaboration, but least prepared for supporting the physical and medical needs of students with IDD. In addition to the wide array of student needs, the sheer number of students (i.e., high caseloads) assigned to one teacher can influence their decision to leave the field

(Cancio et al., 2018; Tyler et al., 2014).

There is a considerable gap in the attrition literature around more specific character traits of students with (dis)abilities, specifically how these students may experience multiple marginalization including but not limited to, (a) ableism, (b) racism, (c) communication bias, (d) politics of appearance, and (e) classism. Previous literature demonstrates ableism as one axis of oppression (Morgan, 1996), lumping all individuals with (dis)abilities as one line on an axis of oppression. I adapted this model to emphasize how individuals with IDD may experience marginalization across multiple axes as shown in Figure 2. In this model, individuals with normative communication skills who are white, able-bodied, closer to normative standards of appearance, and have high socioeconomic status are positioned closer to privilege. As individuals move away from these normative standards, they are more likely to experience oppression.

Figure 2

Intersectionality of The Multiple Ways Individuals With (Dis)abilities May Be Marginalized



Note. Adapted from Kathryn Pauly Morgan, *"Describing the Emperor's New Clothes: Three Myths of Education (In)Equality." The Gender Question in Education: Theory, Pedagogy &*

Politics, Ann Diller et al., Boulder CO: Westview, 1996. SES = Socioeconomic Status.

Ableism. Ableism is the overarching oppressive system that allows one group of individuals to uphold those meeting the normative standards of society while oppressing people deemed as outsiders of the main group (Goodly, 2016). Wolbring (2008) goes on to explain that ableism perpetuates a medical model of (dis)ability which categorizes individuals as needing to be fixed rather than accepting biodiversity and variations of being. Ableism has been used by dominant societies to justify elevation of some people's rights while oppressing others. This oppressive belief system is responsible for the routine justification for excluding children with IDD from general education settings (Goodly, 2016). Teachers of children with (dis)abilities are often non-(dis)abled and therefore unprepared to understand the lived experiences of their students labeled *disabled*.

Racism. Children of Color are disproportionately represented in special education because of a system designed to allow white non-(dis)abled people to develop standards they deem *normative*. These explicit and implicit biases result in Black students being three times more likely to receive a high-incidence (dis)ability label and more than 200% likely to receive an EBD diagnosis (Artiles, 2013). According to Artiles (2013), even when controlling for poverty, a person's race is still a predicting factor when it comes to disability diagnosis. Special education attrition and teacher preparation literature does not address how race plays a role in the lives of students and the teachers working with them.

Communication bias. The ability to communicate using normative language plays an influential role in how the dominant and often oppressive culture labels and categorizes human beings (Hughes, 2018). (Dis)ability categories, such as autism, rely heavily on individuals' normative test scores related to expressive and receptive language, indicating whether the person

is perceived to be high or low functioning (Biklen, 1990; Hughes, 2018, Erevelles, 2018). Biklen (1990) describes the general census that individuals with autism exhibit communication delays, mutism, echolalia, and perseverative speech patterns which society uses as justification when making assumptions about the level of *smartness* within each individual. Individuals who communicate using Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices, sign language, and diverse speech articulation are experiencing discrimination based on their non-normative communication methods (Bellecci et al., 2018). Access to the ability to use normative communication methods is a social power, and those who do not have it are forced to learn systems upholding ableism, *smartness*, and *whiteness* or be considered defective or non-human (Erevelles, 2018).

Classism. Individuals born into homes with higher economic status have more opportunities to *normalize* their children, by paying for early interventions such as occupational, speech, and physical therapies. For example, once a child receives an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnosis, parents with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to enroll their children in Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA; Lovaas, 1987) home therapy than those families with lower socioeconomic status (Irvin, McBee, Boyd, Hume, & Odom, 2012). The research around inequitable access to early interventions for children with ASD is skewed as West et al. (2016) examined literature about individuals with autism and other developmental (dis)abilities, discovering that the majority of researchers did not report the ethnicity of participants and when they did the majority of subjects were white, male, and from high socioeconomic status (West et al., 2016).

Politics of appearance. Not only are individuals with (dis)abilities judged against what dominant culture defines as normative standards of ability (e.g., access to *smartness*), but a

person's appearance also plays a role in how they are judged (Taylor, 2015). One study by O'Byrne and Muldoon (2017), observed that individuals with moderate intellectual (dis)ability levels reported lower self-worth than those who had borderline diagnoses (e.g., considered closer to *normative* standards), indicating that those more impacted by their (dis)ability had heightened awareness of their segregation from general education populations, which affected how they viewed their own physical appearance. Emerging research also suggests that it is possible that individuals with (dis)abilities are bullied based on appearance more frequently than non-(dis)abled peers (Bucchianeri, Gower, McMorris, & Eisenbert, 2016). Bucchianeri et al. (2016)

Research Gaps Across Ecological Systems

Overall, special education research does not extend to the macrolevel, often opting to focus on the micro- and mesosystems. While attrition research touches on exosystem in regard to teacher preparation, professional development, evaluation systems, and working conditions, little is known about the how these issues impact the inner workings of teachers and the influence the macrosystem conveys. Special education teachers are not part of the higher-level education system within school districts, rather they are subjects who experience the consequences of district level decisions – for better or worse.

Given that poor school climate leads to higher rates of attrition, it is alarming that very little research focuses on how the macrosystem influences these school structures. Segregating pre-service special education teachers from their general education teachers at the university level is concerning as this separation continues throughout a teachers' career. In a school setting where people hold beliefs about special education as less than, their special education teachers run the risk of internalizing others' negative ideals (Roegman et al., 2018). To truly understand school climate, research needs to focus on how the macrosystem influences relationships

between special education teachers and their general education colleagues.

The characteristics of and relationship between individual special education teachers and their students is at the center of Brownell et al.'s (1993) model and the majority of attrition research. However, this literature on teacher and student characteristics does not take into account the ways in which macrosystems influence the inner workings of these individuals and their identity development. On a macro level, research has yet to explain the impact of dominant societal beliefs about normative standards (as outlined by White and non-(dis)abled individuals) on the inner workings of teachers.

Interventions Targeting Attrition

Given the complex nature of special education teacher attrition, it is not surprising that researchers have yet to reach a consensus on the most effective interventions to mitigate attrition. The prevalent interventions focus on mentorship, induction services, and coaching (Collins, Sweigart, Landrum, and Cook, 2017). Other emerging strategies include professional development opportunities (Kennedy, 2016), wellness programs (West et al., 2010; increasing Emotional Intelligence [EI; Platsidou, 2010]), and stress management tools (Williams & Poel, 2006). Collins et al. (2017) suggest that special education teachers must manage both their personal domains (e.g., informal mentoring relationships, professional learning communities, etc.) and professional domains (e.g., effective instruction, etc.). They contend that teachers who receive supports across both domains are more likely to have higher job satisfaction, lower stress, and an improved commitment to remain in the field coupled with greater self-efficacy. However, this report was aimed at all special education teachers, without mentioning teachers of students with IDD.

Mentoring as a whole has been shown to positively influence special education teachers'

decisions to stay in the field (Whitaker, 2000) but the current research lacks consensus on a framework for planning mentorship interventions that contribute to a reduction in attrition. Commonalities exist across mentorship programs, such as elements that include (a) emotional supports (Bay & Parker-Katz, 2009; Dempsey, Arthur-Kelly, & Carter, 2009; Smith & Israel, 2010); (b) mentor pairings with mentees who have both worked with similar students (Marshall et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2004); (c) content which address district procedures, adapting curriculum, recruiting materials/resources, and how to complete paperwork (White & Mason, 2006); and (d) observations with feedback (Bethune & Wood, 2013; Fox, Hemmeter, Snyder; Kamman & Long, 2010).

Mentorship is defined as a process wherein a teacher receives ongoing, individualized supports from an experienced educator (Israel, Carahan, Snyder, & Williamson, 2012) in the classroom and greater school environment (Williams & Poel, 2016). Similarly, researchers described coaching and induction services as the process where experienced teachers provided early career educators with sustained and focused supports. Coaching models focus more strategically on teacher and student interactions in regard to systematic instruction (Hemmeter, Hardy, Schnitz, Adams, & Kinder, 2015). A comprehensive coaching model includes (a) a focus on partnerships, (b) action planning, (c) focused observations, (d) reflection and feedback, and (e) action (Aguilar, 2013). One thing that administrators must avoid is creating mentorship programs that feel like additional burdensome tasks to early special education teachers (Hagaman et al., 2017). In Hagaman et al.'s (2017) study, early career participants reported feeling overwhelmed by mentorship tasks and preferred support from paraprofessionals who could aid them in the classroom during immediate situations. In order to explore interventions aimed at reducing teacher attrition, I have organized these studies across micro-, meso-, exo-,

and macrosystems (they are also summarized in Table 1). Note that the availability of interventions becomes scarcer across exo- and macrosystems due to gaps in the literature.

Table 1

Attrition Factors as Related to Interventions Across Ecological Systems

System	Attrition Factors	Interventions Targeting Attrition

Microsystem *(Classrooms: Students & Teachers)*	• Qualifications
	• Teacher characteristics
	  ○ Outside factors such as, moving, pregnancy, & personal finances
	  ○ Low self-efficacy
	  ○ Less experienced teachers leave at higher rates
	  ○ Role ambiguity
	• Student characteristics
	  ○ Varying diagnoses categories
	  ○ Multiply marginalized
	• Large class sizes
		• Mentorship and coaching targeting:
		  ○ Increasing quality instructional skills
		  ○ Expanding coping strategies
		  ○ Improving self-efficacy
		  ○ Engaging in coaching & performance feedback

Mesosystem *(Schools)*	• Poor school climate • Lack of collaboration between special & general education teachers • Inadequate support from central office, administrators, general education teachers, & parents	• Improving collaboration between general and special educators

Exosystem *(School Districts & Universities)*	• Teacher education at university levels
	• Lack of professional development
	• District mandated teacher evaluations
	• In inadequate working conditions
	  ○ Insufficient salaries
	  ○ Location in urban or rural district
	  ○ Excessive paperwork
	  ○ Teaching in self-contained settings
		• Creating or providing access to professional development specific to (dis)ability category
		• Mentorship for the evaluation process

Macrosystem *(Dominant society)*	• Dominant cultural narratives • Over-representation of minoritized students in special education (i.e., legal segregation) • Negative & oppressive perceptions of (dis)ability	• Advocating & providing tools for facilitating inclusion

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Note. Adapted from "Understanding special education teacher attrition: A conceptual model and implications for teacher educators," by Mary T. Brownell & Stephen W. Smith, 1993, *Teacher Education and Special Education: The Journal of the Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children, 16 3*, 270-282. Copyright 1993 by Teacher Education and Special Education).

Microsystem Interventions

The majority of attrition interventions occur at the microsystem level. In this section, mentorship, coaching, and induction interventions are used simultaneously given the similarities in definitions and purpose. Within this emerging body of intervention research, very few studies focus specifically on teachers working with students who have IDD. This provides further evidence that when talking about special education, students with IDD are omitted from conversations because the dominant ableist society considers these individuals to be broken (Leonardo et al., 2011). The literature addresses (a) teacher and student interactions through the use of observable instructional strategies, (b) coping strategies, and (c) self-efficacy.

Teacher and student interactions. The interaction between students and teachers is at the heart of Brownell et al. (1993) ecological model and the majority of attrition intervention research. Bethune et al. (2013) implemented a coaching intervention to increase educators' (*N* = 3) use of function-based interventions on students' problem and replacement behavior. They found a functional relationship between teacher fidelity scores and coaching. Fox et al. (2011) conducted a study to investigate the impact of coaching on teachers' use of the Teaching Pyramid Model. The researchers found a functional relationship between the training protocol with coaching and the special education teachers' (*N* = 3) implementation. Brown, Stephenson, and Carter (2014) developed multicomponent training (MCT) for teachers specifically working

with students who have IDD (*N* = 4). Researchers determined a functional relationship between MCT and coaching, using a multiple-probe (across participants) single subject research design. More research on attrition interventions should include retention outcomes.

E-Mentoring. Mentoring programs often have limitations such as the inability to find mentors for teachers across large districts or in rural schools (Abell, Collins, Keinert, & Pennington, 2014). As a result, researchers are looking towards technology as a way to mitigate challenges to mentoring through online mentorship opportunities (Gentry, 2016; Smith & Israel, 2010). In a review of the literature on e-mentoring, Smith et al. (2010) highlight that many early career special educators have limited access to other special education teachers in their buildings making potential mentors invaluable. Israel et al. (2012) designed a virtual bug-in-ear (VBIE) framework to address chronic teacher shortages and a lack of mentors within schools who have specific experience supporting children with significant needs. Their model includes remote classroom observations, shared goal setting, VBIE, ongoing professional development, and reflection on goals.

Coping strategies. Marshall et al. (2013) designed a mentoring model that specifically focused on emotional supports and coping strategies for dealing with the most cited reasons for attrition: too much paperwork, lack of planning time, multi-categorical classrooms, large caseloads, and not enough time and support to collaborate with families. Of the first group of early career special education teachers (*N* = 19) participating in the mentorship program, 80% remained employed in the district as compared with national rates of 60% in the first five years of teaching. Also, Israel et al. (2014) evaluated a program designed to address the emotional and professional development of beginning special education teachers (*N* = 16). They found that a notable percentage of the time spent between mentee and mentor was related to the microsystem.

Self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's beliefs about his or her own ability to successfully perform specific tasks (Bandura, 1977). Throughout the literature, burnout was consistently found to negatively correlate with teachers' self-efficacy across multiple studies (Lee, Patterson, & Vega, 2011; Ruble, Usher, & McGrew, 2011; Sarçam and Sakiz, 2014). Israel et al. (2014) focused on self-efficacy in their mentorship study and also found emotional and professional supports interrelated. In one study on microteaching, researchers increased pre-service special education teachers' (*n* = 35) sense of self-efficacy significantly more than the control group (*n* = 35) who received the business-as-usual model for teacher preparation (Arsal, 2014). Unfortunately, the literature outlining interventions geared toward improving self-efficacy is limited.

Mesosystem Interventions

Interventions aimed at interpersonal relationships between special education teachers, colleagues, administrators, and parents reflect an attempt to address mesosystem concerns pertaining to school climate and working conditions beyond the immediate classroom. Lavian (2012) surveyed special education teachers (*n* = 62) and general education teachers (*n* = 62) discovering that the more unsupportive the school organizational climate was perceived, the greater were the participants' feeling of stress and burnout. White et al. (2006) surveyed mentoring program participants from programs adhering to the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Mentoring Induction Guidelines (seven national sites over two years). One hundred and forty-seven early career teachers responded to their follow-up survey and identified areas of needed support. Given how many attrition related factors are within the mesosystem, it is alarming that mentorship literature has a limited focus in this area.

Exosystem Interventions

The exosystem includes the influence of certification requirements on pre-service teachers, professional development opportunities (or lack thereof), district mandated evaluations, and adverse working conditions (e.g. working in self-contained settings). Limited interventions were conducted at this level of the ecological system. Of the research applicable to the exosystem level, Israel et al. (2014) conducted a study examining mentorship support around mandated teacher evaluations. The purpose of this research was to explore how mentees would respond to mentors who also evaluated their performance. Researchers found that (n = 16) participants reported that the evaluation aspect of mentorship did not adversely affect their mentorship experience and in fact, may have enhanced the process by providing structure to performance feedback. Brownell et al. (1993) point out that special education teachers who teach in a multi-categorical or self-contained class experience higher attrition rates. Kilgore and Griffin's (1998) supported this in their study of four early-career teachers (N = 4). The only participant in their study who worked in a self-contained setting quit after experiencing feelings of isolation. Perhaps mentorship could provide help acquiring coping tools (also part of the microsystem) to assist with working across multi-categorical classrooms or self-contained settings, as well as handling the high levels of paperwork (Marshall et al., 2013).

Macrosystem Interventions

Overarching cultural beliefs and ideologies of the dominant culture are represented in the macrosystem (Billingsley et al., 2004). How administrators, teachers, and parents perceive learners can impact a teachers' feelings in the classroom. Jackson, Ryndak, & Wehmeyer (2009) warn that the inclusive education trend is regressing despite research demonstrating students with significant disabilities benefit from spending proportions of their day in general education placements. With a growing body of literature supporting inclusion of students with IDD

(Jackson et al., 2009; Marshall & Goodall, 2015; McDonnell, Mathot-Buckner, & Thorson, 2001; Minke, Bear, & Deemer, 1996; Wolpert, 2001), mentorship could also support teachers in their early careers as they learn to advocate for these students' rights. In fact, Sindelar, Shearer, Yendol-Hoppey, and Liebert (2006) found that inclusion directly suffers as a result of attrition. It is often the special educators in a building that act as facilitators of inclusion, so their departure results in total regression of this movement (Sindelar et al., 2006). Considering that the macrosystem effects all areas of the ecological system from micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro levels, there is a gap in the literature around interventions aimed at shifting the belief systems perpetuating ableism and racism throughout school districts. Furthermore, research rarely examines how systems of oppression influence the inner workings of special education teachers.

Teacher and Student Identities

For decades, researchers, administrators, and policymakers have focused on teachers through a deficit lens, suggesting that the problem of attrition resonates within educators and implying inadequate preparation and skillsets. As a result, the majority of attrition interventions are aimed at improving teachers, sending a message that only perpetuates feelings of burnout. Previous research has not examined how the identities of teachers intersect with the identities of the students in their classroom. Emerging research demonstrates that while 47% of students with disabilities are students of Color, only 18% of their general and special education teachers are teachers of Color (Billingsley, Bettini, & Williams, 2017). Furthermore, there is no research on how many teachers with (dis)abilities work in special education, leaving one to assume that the majority of the special education teachers are themselves non-(dis)abled. Unpacking the special education teacher attrition crisis will require a critical look at how teachers develop their identities, and how student identity plays a role (especially those who are multiply marginalized'

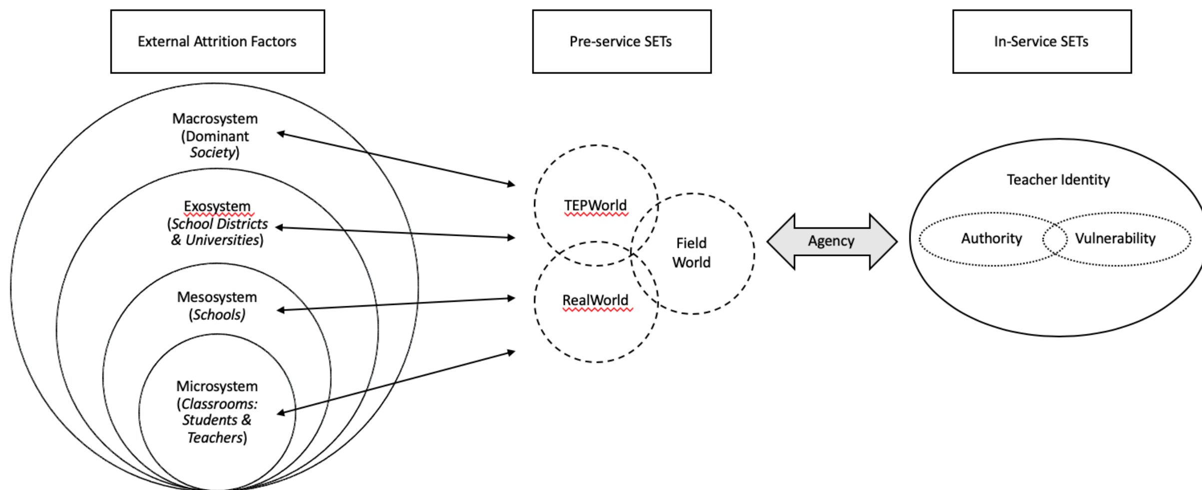
Roegman et al., 2018), in how teaching and learning are enacted. The theories of teaching identity and DisCrit may help illuminate this complex dynamic. First, I will synthesize what the literature says about teaching identity. Second, I will highlight how DisCrit can be used to explain challenges that students with IDD face on a daily basis beknown to most white non-(dis)abled teachers.

Teaching Identity

There is limited research on how policy mandates, curriculum guidelines, state standards, and other such societal factors shape teachers' identities (Lasky, 2005). From a sociocultural perspective, teachers have agency which affords them the ability to influence their lives and classroom contexts (i.e. the microsystem level; Lasky, 2005). Simultaneously, they are influenced by school climate (i.e. the mesosystem level; Greenway et al., 2013), school district mandates (i.e. the exosystem level; Ruppar et al., 2017), and societal, historical, and cultural beliefs (i.e. the macrosystem level; Lasky, 2005). As depicted in Figure 3, the process of identity development starts at the pre-service teacher level where teachers experience pressures from these systems of ecology while navigating between (a) field experiences, (b) their university program, and (c) previous experiences (Horn, Nolen, Ward, and Campbell, 2008). As teachers transition into their careers as in-service teachers, agency serves as the vehicle for continuing to adopt or resist teaching practices based on pre-service experiences as well as on-the-job pressures (Alsup, 2018). Given the gap in literature specifically around special education teachers' identities, I will borrow from the general education literature to outline what is known about the development of teacher identities from pre- to in-service, applying findings to special education teacher positions whenever possible.

Figure 3

The influence of external attrition factors special education teachers' identity development



Note. SET = Special education teacher.

Pre-service

One-way researchers frame the identity development process is by describing interactions within various *figured worlds* (Holland et al., 1998). Holland et al. (1998) explains how figured worlds are, "socially produced, culturally constructed activities" (p. 40) proving examples such as (a) how gender relations result in women spending time worried about their attractiveness; (b) the way in which a person enters the figurative world of academics where books are prioritized above all; or even (c) the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) groups in which people complete steps, collect tokens marking sobriety durations, and so on. People come to these figurative worlds through societal pressures as well as personal choice. Horn et al. (2008) applied Holland et al.'s figurative world to teachers' identity by specifying three figurative worlds the (a) teacher education preparation world (TEP world) at the university level; (b) internship period, referred to

as Field World; and (c) previous experiences known as the Real World.

In Horn et al.'s (2008) longitudinal ethnographic study of secondary teachers (*N* = 8), they found that pre-service educators made decisions to reject, adopt, modify, and negotiate various teaching practices based on belief systems from the Real World, weighing good teaching ideals (i.e., previous beliefs) with feasibility (i.e., FieldWorld). Tensions arose between the TEPWorld in which theory promotes some teaching practices that are challenging to implement in the FieldWorld and contradict RealWorld ideals. From this friction between worlds, pre-service teachers made decisions to abandon practices, which limited their development of these said skills or, alternatively, it improved their pedagogical reasoning. This becomes increasingly problematic with special education teachers working with students who have IDD because of the complex nature of their teaching roles and discourse around perceptions of (dis)ability (Roegman et al., 2018). Even before deciding to become teachers, individuals witness perceptions about (dis)ability based on the media, friends, family, prior school experiences, work experiences, and so on which may include negative positioning of special educators (Roegman et al., 2018).

An overarching societally deficit view of (dis)ability is especially problematic for teachers working with students who have IDD as it adds to the tensions between figurative worlds. For example, pre-service teachers in Roegman et al.'s (2018) study demonstrated strong beliefs that (dis)ability is socially constructed based on previous experiences in the RealWorld coupled with TEPworld influences. When these pre-service teachers entered the FieldWorld, they describe experiences as "discouraging," "frustrating," and "hopeless" because of dominant normative narratives within schools included "stigmas against…being special ed" (p. 302).

In-service

A teachers' identity development is an ongoing and dynamic process according to

Britzman (1992), who points out the importance of framing teacher identity as a process not a destination. Prior to entering a classroom, teachers come to the field with perceptions of what it means to be a *good* teacher, with some potentially positioning themselves as *saviors* of children in need (Schutz, Nichols, & Schwenke, 2018). Upon entering the realities of a classroom, student teachers experience constraints and affordances which can challenge their sense of agency, causing them to shift their sense of self within this context (Schutz et al., 2018). For example, Schultz et al. (2018) warns that when teachers find they cannot save every child, they must reassess what it means to be a *good* teacher given that the *savior* complex no longer fits. Either teachers continue experiencing conflicting self-views every time they feel unsuccessful with a student or they can choose to rectify their identity, leading to more realistic ways of engaging with students (Schultz et al., 2018).

Agency, authority, & vulnerability. Alsup (2018) defines agency as an individuals' ability to independently make choices with or without the influences of societal pressures. As teachers navigate their sense of agency, friction raises between authority and ultimate vulnerability (Alsup, 2018; Lasky, 2005). Authority refers to a teachers' ability to feel safe in their environment in regard to making decisions, collaborating, and sometimes taking risks in order to learn new skills (Alsup, 2018). Contrastingly, vulnerability may develop when teachers experience powerlessness or defenselessness in their teaching settings, which can lead to feeling a lack of control over their environment (Lasky, 2005). Some research suggests that vulnerability may also serve as a positive force helping teachers move past challenges when working with individuals they trust.

In a study of female English teachers ($N = 6$), Alsup (2018) found that as novice teachers receive mentorship, they sometimes experience vulnerability as a biproduct of successful

feedback loops. Nevertheless, when a participant expressed disagreement with a mentor's feedback, her feelings of vulnerability shifted to a loss of agency and she even reported that her self-efficacy felt threatened. In this example, the mentor asserts authority over the novice teacher resulting in feelings of lost control for a new teacher trying on skills. The tension between authority and vulnerability is especially true with special education teachers who are often tasked as authority figures in some ways, including paraprofessional management and IEP programming decisions, but are limited in others, such as student placements (i.e. access to inclusionary settings; Kurth et al., 2014).

While teachers navigate and balance their sense of agency, authority, and vulnerability, research on teacher identity development should also consider a teachers' race and ability. Specifically, researchers and teacher preparation programs should explore how a teacher's identity influences their work with students who may be multiply marginalized. While the majority of the teaching force remains white, most teachers are not well versed in culturally relevant teaching (Jackson, 2018). Jackson (2018) explains that having teachers of Color may positively impact students of Color but it must go further than that. Teachers must also engage in culturally responsive teaching that includes having high expectations, developing trusting relationships with students, and educating children and adults on the issues of racism. It is problematic when administrators in public schools as well as universities assume that pre-and in-service teachers of Color already have social justice "figured out" (Jackson, 2018, p. Location 5820). Rather, Jackson calls for universities (and school districts) to create programs that help develop and equip all teachers to adapt a social justice-oriented identity in addition to recruiting a more diverse workforce.

Students Identity Through A Disability Critical Race Theory (Dis/Crit) Lens

Critical Race Theory (CRT) may be helpful in exploring how teachers can support diverse student populations. CRT is a movement described as "…a collection of activist and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 3). CRT serves as an overarching umbrella theory from which (Dis)ability Critical Race Theory (Dis/Crit) was born, with one of its tenants being intersectionality (Annamma et al., 2013). Thus, CRT asserts that individuals located on the intersection of race, class, gender, and (dis)ability are often considered to be less than citizens by social, legal, and educational institutions (Erevelles & Minear, 2010). Although these institutions aim to promote equality and prevent oppression, the design and dominant ideologies of these institutions has prevented them from achieving that goal (Erevelles & Minear, 2010). Throughout history, identity has been associated with singular categorizations in social, legal, and educational institutions (Crenshaw, 1989). For example, a Black woman was considered by law and society as either marginalized based on the singular category of being *Black* or of being *woman* despite the more complex phenomenon that Black women were and are still multiply marginalized for being both woman *and* Black (Crenshaw, 1989). Similarly, students with (dis)abilities may be marginalized across multiple axis of oppression such as having a (dis)ability and being a Child of Color. Not only are these children experiencing discrimination based on their (dis)ability category and race, but they experience deeper denigration for being both (dis)abled and of Color (Annamma, 2013).

Intersectionality aims to shed light on how separate systems of oppression are mutually constructed by one another (Erevelles et al., 2010). The aim of DisCrit as a new framework, was not to contradict CRT, but rather expand the conversation around equity and social justice to include individuals of Color with (dis)abilities, a group often multiply marginalized or not even

considered part of the conversation (Annamma et al., 2013). DisCrit maintains that not only do individuals with (dis)abilities experience oppression and marginalization, but systems of racism and ableism are interdependent, as evidenced by the high rates of Children of Color sentenced to special education programs (Annamma et al., 2013). The critique of special education is not that the education system wrongly places individuals in special education based on the color of their skin (although that may sometimes be the case), but rather that the education system is designed to promote white, Eurocentric, middle-to-upper class, and ableist learning behaviors (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). The special education teachers working with these students are unprepared to work in solidarity with their students as they do not have shared life experiences, nor are they educated in culturally responsive practices.

Conclusion

This review of the literature demonstrates the need to better understand how a special education teacher's identity evolves throughout their careers and how outside pressures from dominant society may interfere with this dynamic process. While current attrition research focuses on observable factors mostly within the micro- and mesosystems levels, more information is needed on how district mandates and overarching dominant society views influence a teachers' identity. Holland et al.'s (1998) theory of identity development is used as a lens for investigating special education teachers' identity development. Moreover, DisCrit provides a lens for understanding how the identities of special education teachers intersect with the identities of their students with IDD who may be multiply marginalized. Together, these theories will allow me to examine the complex relationship between the inner workings of special education teachers and how they make sense of working alongside students who may be multiply marginalized.

First, the literature demonstrates a focus on observable attrition factors across micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems (Brownell et al., 1993), with the majority of attrition interventions focused on the classroom (microsystem) and school (mesosystems) levels. While mentorship, coaching, induction services, and professional development interventions show promising results in regard to improving teachers' instructional practice and sometimes commitment to the field, research has not linked these interventions to significant reductions in special education teacher attrition. Therefore, I will examine how experienced special education teachers who have stayed in the field and lead productive careers express their own identity development over time.

Second, research on general education teachers uses Holland et al.'s (1998) figured worlds to organize pre-service identity development in three potential said worlds, (1) TEP World, (2) Field World, and (3) Real World (Horn et al., 2008). Because the literature does not specifically investigate special education teachers, this research will investigate the figured worlds special education teachers experience to better understand their agency as they navigate these settings. For instance, it is more than likely that special education teachers working with students who have IDD engage in these types of settings but may also encounter additional figurative worlds such as an Extraordinary/Marginalized World. I use this world as a potential example given the participants' responses in Roegman et al.'s (2018) study of pre-service special education teachers working with students who have IDD. Findings included examples of instances when pre-service special educators were either held up as highly trained *extraordinary* instructors with skills beyond general education teachers' capacity or they were *marginalized* along with their students as being less-than general education teachers.

Finally, students with IDD may experience multiple marginalization due to their

intersectional identities. As I research teacher identity, I will use DisCrit to explore how dominant societal views and systems of oppression at the macrosystems level influence student and teacher experiences. I hope to identify how white teachers working with students who are multiply marginalized influences and conflicts with internal belief systems as played out in their identity development. This malleable and ongoing developmental process sheds light on the influence and meaning making of societal pressures such as dominant normative standards upholding white, ableist, and Eurocentric ideals.

Using Holland et al.'s theory of identity, I plan to specifically study how special education teachers of students with IDD developed their teaching identity. While Roegman et al. focused on pre-service educators, I will explore experienced teachers who have remained in the field. Ruohotie-Lyhty (2018) calls for more research investigating how individual teacher identity develops over the long-term. My study will explore the inner workings of teachers later in their careers with the goal of identifying how teacher identities supported their commitment to the field of special education over time.

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

This study aimed to explore the dynamic process in which special education teachers working with students who have IDD construct their identities and the ways they interact with stakeholders and job responsibilities across ecological systems (e.g. micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems) that uphold dominant normative standards. The questions guiding this research required participants to interpret and attribute meaning to their experiences which can best be achieved using qualitative methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, this study used a qualitative multiple-case design with five experienced special education teachers who work with students who have IDD and have demonstrated longevity and commitment to the field of special education. Findings from this research added to the field by providing a rich context for understanding the phenomenon of teacher identity development and exploring how interactions across ecological systems influence this process, especially the macrosystem which includes dominant normative standards. This research is unique in that it focuses on experienced special education teachers who have stayed committed to their jobs, rather than attending to their deficits (Howell et al., 2005). Therefore, this study aimed to pivot from a hyper focus on teacher *attrition*, toward teacher *retention, which* refers to the "staying" of highly qualified special education teachers. The questions guiding this research were:

How do experienced teachers of students with IDD:

- Describe how their teaching identities have and continue to evolve,
- Navigate factors, such as key relationships and job responsibilities, across ecological systems (e.g. micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems) that uphold dominant normative standards

I answered these research questions by interviewing participating teachers about their

identity, specifically the ways in which they navigated between feelings of agency, authority and vulnerability. I also asked participants to provide and describe artifacts which illustrate their critical inclusive lens. As Holland et al.'s (1998) theory of identity development outlines, individuals interact within socially constructed figurative worlds, therefore this study aimed to better understand the various contexts experienced special education teachers inhabit. Applying this framework to both data collection and analysis helped me identify these figurative worlds and understand how they influence participants' identity construction.

Understanding special education teachers' identity development required in depth analysis best achieved using a multiple case study approach. A case study refers to a choice to investigate a bounded system, which are nouns, things, or entities (Stake, 2006). In case studies, the unit of analysis (e.g. the teacher) is not necessarily the topic of the research, rather I chose teachers as cases, but my investigation explored the teachers' experiences in regard to identity construction (Merriam et al., 2016). However, separation between the case and phenomenon under study did not remain as clear as intersecting contexts (Merriam et al., 2016) and figurative worlds emerged (Holland et al., 1998). For example, while I focused on individual teachers and their identity development, they expressed membership in figured worlds which also included policies and phenomenon related to dominant societal norms (Holland et al., 1998). The purpose of the multiple case study approach was to discover ways in which the contexts of several different cases were influenced by the overarching phenomenon of identity construction through cross-case analysis (Stake, 2006).

Participants

I used *purposive sampling* which refers to the process of identifying cases based on set criteria including attributes essential to the study (Merriam, 1998). This multiple case study

carefully selected experienced special education teachers who have remained committed to the field of special education for an extended period of time as cases for the study. Each teacher case demonstrated adherence to a critical inclusive lens, actively attempting to disrupt the medical model deficit view of students with IDD. The phenomenon of study was their teacher identity and the way they navigated pressures of their role. The teachers in the study met the following inclusion criteria: (a) were a current special education teacher, (b) had taught for five or more years, (c) worked with students who have IDD, and (d) demonstrated a critically inclusive lens which included the active disruption of traditional medical model views of (dis)ability. More specifics on how I measured these inclusion criteria are outlined in the following section.

Teacher Recruitment

Prior to beginning the study, I obtained permission from the University of Washington Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once I received approval, I contacted peers and colleagues working with teachers of students with IDD to begin recruiting those who met my criteria. I also contacted experienced special education teachers whom I observed in the field during my career as a teacher and also as a coach of pre-service special education teachers during my doctoral program at my university. Snowball recruiting was used because teachers often know others who are likeminded in their teaching philosophy. Lastly, I emailed special education directors at six neighboring school districts within 50 miles of my home in order to inquire about potential participants meeting my inclusion criteria. Teachers who were interested in participating in the project completing a screener that was sent via email (see Appendix A). The goal of the figure was to identify experienced teachers of students with IDD who had a critical inclusive lens.

Teacher experience. Ruppar et al. (2017) proposes that simply having many years of experience does not necessarily denote expert teaching status therefore, this study aimed to pre-

screen teachers to ensure that I recruited individuals who demonstrated the *skills* and *qualities* shared by experienced teachers. In their study of IDD teachers, Ruppar et al. found that experienced IDD teachers demonstrated four *skills* (1) advocacy, (2) ability to implement systematic and academic instruction, (3) capacity to individualize and adapt curriculum, and (4) proficiency in maintaining collegial relationships. Furthermore, Ruppar observed that experienced IDD teachers displayed the following *qualities* (a) high expectations, (b) positivity, (c) flexibility and creativity, and (d) the desire to continually improve their practice.

To determine if teachers met these criteria, the email screener (see Appendix A) included questions designed to measure each of these skills and qualities. In addition to the screener, I developed a key to help determine if potential participants' responses meet the criteria (as shown in Appendix B). For example, in order to measure positivity, I referred to an online personality test designed to measure optimism or pessimism to develop answers to the following questions on the screener, (a) What outcomes do you expect for students in your class? And (b) On a scale of 1-10, how much faith and trust do you have in the parents of your students (1 being none, and 10 being the most)? Why? (MyPersonality, n.d.). To determine whether the participants' response demonstrated optimism, the screener key included in Appendix B includes example and non-example responses. Here is an example of what I decided would be considered an optimistic response, "All of the students in my class will be successful whether they leave school prepared to enter the job market or attend college." Contrastingly, this would be considered a non-example, "I'm not sure what my students' outcomes will be, but they have a lot of barriers to face." I used my best judgement to decipher if responses fell within the inclusion criteria relying on my peers and colleagues when questions arose.

Critical inclusionary lens. A critical inclusive lens provides a way to challenge elements

of *exclusion* such as (a) poverty, (b) disadvantage, (c) inequality, (d) discrimination, (e) barriers to access, (f) (dis)ability, (g) isolation, and (h) marginalization (Shookner, 2002). Shookner (2002) identifies the following as elements of *inclusion* (a) adequate income, (b) reduced disparities, (c) human rights, (d) access, (e) ability to participate, (f) valued contribution, (g) belonging, and (h) empowerment. The screener I developed (see Appendix A) incorporated these elements into three questions designed to evaluate whether teachers of students with IDD were using a critically inclusive lens, such as: (a) Describe how you feel that students in your class may or may not be multiply marginalized based on (dis)ability, race, and socioeconomic status; (b) What actions do you take to ensure that students have a sense of belonging?; (c) How do you empower the students in your class? Example and non-example example responses are found in the key at the bottom of Appendix B.

Piloting the screener. In order to make sure that the screener was clear and achieved my goal of identifying whether or not teachers exhibited experienced status and used a critical inclusive lens, I had three of my colleagues read through the screener and provide feedback. I specifically asked how the questions made them feel and if the wording was clear. I then made adjustments to the screener based on their feedback. Results from the screener assisted with my ability to determine if the case would allow me to study the intended phenomenon (Stake, 2006).

Teacher Participants

Using the screener, I identified five participants who met the inclusion criteria. Participants who did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded from the study. However, one of the included participants had four years of experience as a paraprofessional and four years as a special education teacher. After discussing the participant with my advisor and reviewing the teacher's information on the screener, I decided to include her in the study given her total years

of experience in the special education classroom.

All five participants worked in the greater Pacific Northwest across three school districts which included rural, suburban, and urban neighborhoods. School settings varied in classroom type, with teachers serving in self-contained elementary, middle, and high school programs. One participant served in a resource room with prior experience in self-contained settings. The years of teaching experience ranged from four years (with an additional four years as a paraprofessional) to 14 years. Two participants' held bachelor's degrees while three had Master's in the field of special education. The majority of participants identified as white with one participant identifying as mixed race. Three of the participants identified as female, while two identified as male. Participants ranged in age from 30 years old to fifty-four years old. Four of the participants had prior experience working with individuals who have IDD before becoming teachers and four participants had one or more family members who were or are teachers. Demographics and background information for each of the five teacher participants are displayed in Table 2, and Participants are described in greater detail in Chapter 4.

Table 2

Teacher Participant Demographics

Participants	Years Teaching	Highest Degree Completed	Race	Gender	Age	Current Classroom	Prior experience with individuals who have a (dis)ability	Family member who was a teacher
Yelena	8	Bachelor's of Science in Special Education	Mixed	Female	30	Self-contained Elementary School	Best friend had Cerebral Palsy	None
Monique	14	Bachelor's in Elementary & Special Education	White	Female	54	Self-Contained Elementary School	Sister-in-law's sister has IDD	A grandmother, aunt, cousin and two sisters-in-law were teachers
April	4 years as a teacher, 4 years as a para	Master's in Special Education	White	Female	32	Self-contained middle school	Brother has autism Family friend had IDD	Aunt was paraprofessional Dad was an EBD teacher
Nathan	9	Master's	White	Male	41	Resource Room High School	None	Sister was an SET
Teddy	10	Master's	White	Male	33	Self-contained Elementary School	Cousin & Uncle with autism	Father was a teacher for 39 years

Procedure

Data Collection

The nature of qualitative data is in seeking data representative of personal experience in given contexts (Stake, 2010). In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon, this study included (a) interviews, and (b) participant directed artifact collection and analysis. In addition, I created researcher memos, tables, and figures to support my data analysis. The scope of data collected is shown in Table 3. The relationship between data sources and my research questions are also highlighted in Appendix G.

Table 3

Scope of Data Sources

Data Source	Scope of Data
Audio recordings of interviews	15 hours, 3 minutes, 33 seconds
Transcribed interviews	416 pages
Screeners	14 pages
Artifacts	10 artifacts including pictures, posters, objects, descriptions

Interviews. According to Stake (2010), interviews serve three main purposes allowing researchers: (a) access to unique information or interpretations of participants, (b) the ability to collect "numerical aggregation" of information across multiple participants, and (c) opportunities to discover more about a case that was unobservable (p. 95). Interviews were the main source of data in this study and I used them to achieve all three of the purposes outlined by Stake (2010). I used *semi-structured* interviews, which means I used a list of open-ended questions to guide the interviews while allowing participants to share emerging ideas that did not follow the questions exactly (Merriam et al., 2016).

Participants were given the option to engage in face-to-face or virtual (e.g., Facetime, Zoom, Skype, and other such online conferencing programs) interviews. Although online interviews have some weaknesses including the fact that technology can fail and there is the potential for privacy breeches, (Merriam et al., 2016), they also provide many affordances. Conducting interviews online (a) allowed me access to participants across greater distances and (b) permitted both audio and video recordings so I could transcribe the data and re-watch video data to catch nonverbal cues that might otherwise be overlooked (Merriam et al., 2016). Towards

the end of data collection, we experienced the COVID-19 Pandemic, and the only way to finish interviews were online due to stay-at-home lockdown orders. I ensured that the online technology chosen for interviews was approved by the IRB board, minimizing risks to the participants.

I interviewed each teacher participant three times. Two of the interviews included pre-planned protocols, while the third interview protocol was informed by the conversations in interview one and two. The first interview explored the participants' perceptions about their current teacher identity and educational context and how this evolved over time (see Appendix C for protocol; Alsup, 2018; Lachicotte et al., 1998; Lasky, 2005). During interview 1, I requested that teachers describe (a) their current teacher identity, and (b) how they feel others defined them as a special education teacher. As Lasky (2005) writes, the process of developing teacher identity not only includes how individuals define themselves as teachers, but also, how other people view them. Next, I asked participants how varying factors shaped their teacher identity over time, such as experiences with figured worlds (e.g. TEPWorld, FieldWorld, and RealWorld; Horn et al., 2008). I requested that participants describe how they navigate external factors and the tensions that arise between their ability to have agency and authority (e.g. making decisions) while sometimes experiencing vulnerability (e.g. a lack of being able to make decisions without feelings of fear or uncertainty). The ways in which being a white non-disabled teacher working with students who may be multiply marginalized was also explored and discussed. Lastly, I asked teachers to explain how they resolve conflict and how their teacher identity may or may not have influenced their commitment to stay in the field.

The second interview focused more on how external factors across ecosystems did or did not influence their teaching identity as depicted in Appendix D. Starting with the microsystem,

interview questions inquired as to the ways that students and paraprofessionals at the classroom level influenced teacher identity development over time. Mesosystem level questions included themes around school climate and support received or not received from building administrators, general education colleagues, and parents. Next, I asked questions about the exosystem, which included how district professional development opportunities, evaluation systems, and paperwork influenced teacher identity development. Lastly, I asked about how overarching dominant societal views of students who may be multiply marginalized influenced teacher identity.

After each interview, I transcribed the interview and synthesized the data into bullet points before conducting subsequent interviews. This permitted me to conduct a member check with each participant, while also allowing me to make low-level inferences. I began to notice patterns in the individuals' personal backgrounds, which is a gap in the current literature base. This noticing informed my approach to the development of the Interview 3 protocol. Although Brownell and Smith's (1993) ecological conceptual framework focused on the figurative worlds teachers ranging from the classroom to district levels, little has been done to explore teachers' personal experiences and backgrounds that may influence their professional identities. Thus, I incorporated questions about teachers' personal experiences and backgrounds and how those experiences influence their role as an educator into the Interview 3 protocol (see Appendix E). Specifically, questions were designed to elicit data about their journey into the profession. Other questions sought specifics about their educational background, support systems during the process of becoming a teacher, and previous experiences with individuals who have (dis)abilities in familial and community settings. This third interview allowed me to hear how teachers describe their identities, and reflect on their power, positionality, and agency across personal and

professional worlds.

Artifacts. The use of artifacts in qualitative research can help researchers better understand a phenomenon by analyzing various documents which add to understanding the phenomenon of study (Stake, 2006). Merriam et al. (2016) describes how artifacts can be physical materials like public and personal records, but they can also be products of popular culture including photos, videos, and film. As I got to know participants better, I developed a deeper understanding of the types of artifacts necessary to triangulate data across interviews and artifacts.

I requested that participants provide me with two artifacts that demonstrated their teacher and then personal identity development (see artifact prompts in Appendix F). Despite being asked to provide one artifact, most participants embraced the activity, sharing multiple artifacts for each prompt. Teachers were provided with multiple options for artifacts to share including: (a) journal entry, (b) picture, (c) email from a parent or administrator, (d) collage, (e) video log or audio recording, (f) drawing/sketch, (g) mind map, (h) example of student work, (i) evidence used in an evaluation or National Board submission, or (j) a poem. The types of artifacts participants actually provided included: (a) artwork from students, (b) specialized and adaptive equipment for students with IDD, (b) letters from administrators, (c) artifacts from the classroom such as visual supports, (d) classroom signs and posters with positive messaging, (e) a letter wall filled with notes from students, (f) a Rosary, (g) stuffed animals, (h) figurines, (i) photos of family members, (j) collages, (k) posters, (l) a basketball, and (m) art projects.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed, cleaned of identifiable information, and then uploaded into Dedoose, a cross-platform cloud-based software tool to assist with analyzing qualitative

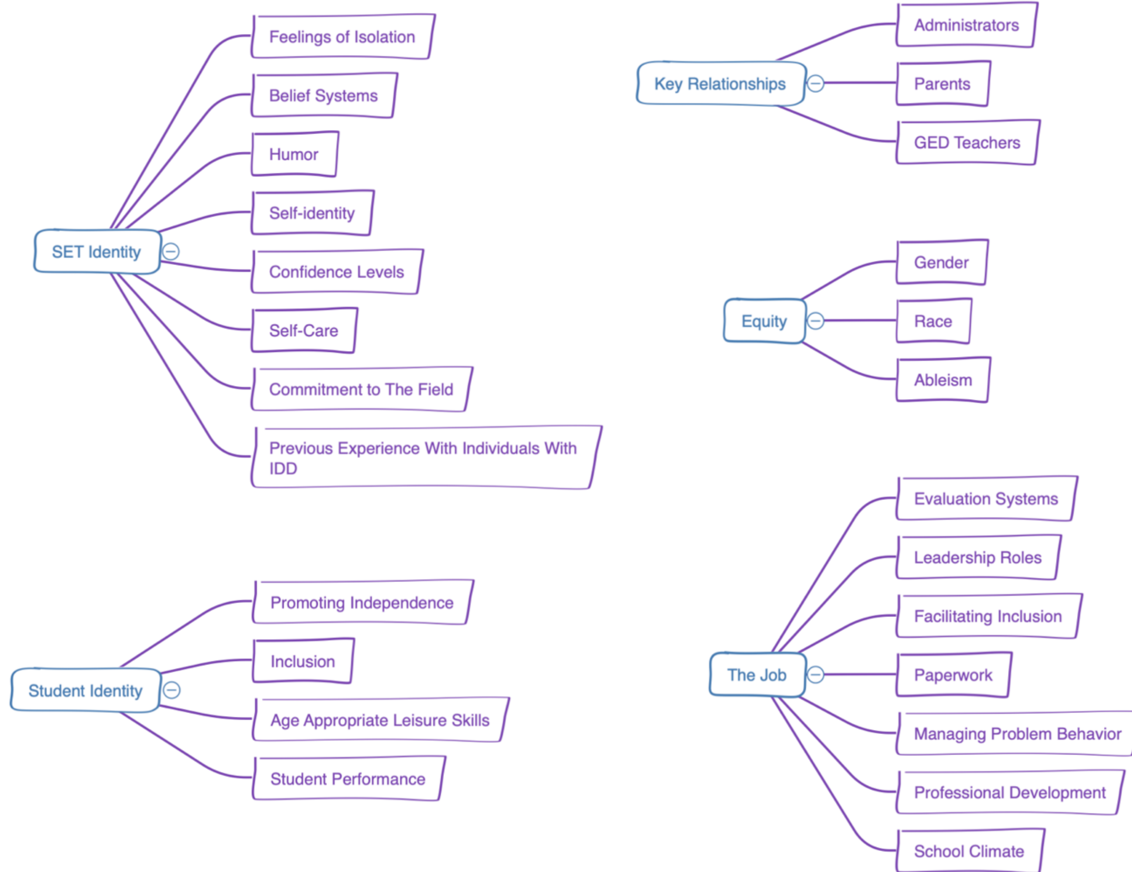
data. Conversations about artifacts communicated via audio or email were also included. Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously to facilitate iterative interview protocol development. For example, each interview was transcribed before conducting the next interview and the interview data was summarized using bullet points to identify initial descriptive themes which were later used to inform first-round coding and subsequent interview protocols.

Coding. I analyzed the data across two sets of coding cycles as outlined by Saldaña (2012). In the first coding cycle, I used various strategies including In Vivo Coding, descriptive coding, and simultaneous coding. During the second coding cycle, I collapsed codes into smaller categories and organized across research questions.

First round of coding. I started data analysis by using In Vivo Coding, which is taking direct quotes from participants and organizing them into a series of smaller codes (Saldaña, 2012). This allowed me to familiarize myself with participants' perspectives across interview transcripts. I started by making a rough list of categories discussed in the interview while transcribing (Merriam et al., 2016). As outlined by Merriam et al. (2016), categories are not data themselves but rather derived from data based on my observations. An example of a list of categories derived from an interview include the following categories (a) high expectations, (b) teamwork, (c) advocating/pushing for inclusion, (d) students come first, (e) isolation as a special education teacher, (f) agency, and (g) teamwork. I kept all of these bulleted lists until the last interview was conducted, wherein I combined the lists to inform my initial coding tree as shown in Figure 4. The overarching codes were special education teacher identity, student identity, key relationships, equity, and the job of teaching, with all other codes fitting within these themes.

Figure 4

Summary of The First Round of Codes



Throughout the interviews, I engaged in simultaneous data collection, which is when analysis may occur both in and out of the field (Merriam et al., 2016). Transcriptions took place after each interview, before the subsequent interview with the same participant. However, given the various timelines of interviews, I was able to conduct Interview 1, 2, and 3 to completion with a participant before finishing the second interview with other participants. This allowed me to adjust interview protocols simultaneously while collecting data. For example, I began to wonder and memo about a metric to gauge a teachers' commitment to the field during their early career as compared with their current commitment levels. I then added the question, "Given a

school has 180 days in a year, how many of the 180 days did you think about leaving? How many your first year of teaching?" (Appendix E). While a subjective question, this allowed me to conceptualize differences in their commitment levels across.

During my simultaneous data collection, I used descriptive coding which is the process of coding field notes and other documents that relate to the data collection process (Saldaña, 2012). For example, I recorded voice memos after interviews which described any information not captured by interview such as inferences around what questions I may need to ask in the future. These descriptive codes allowed me to capture my inferences as they relate to observations as well as any outlying data I might have missed in interviews. My protocol Interview 3 was the direct result of a memo in which I wondered about the personal identity of teachers. After analyzing memos, I noticed that I often had wonderings after the interview around the teacher's personal experiences such as their relationships with teachers in their family and prior experiences with individuals are who have IDD. I then designed Interview 3 protocol around these observations to explore a teacher's personal identity and their process of becoming an educator.

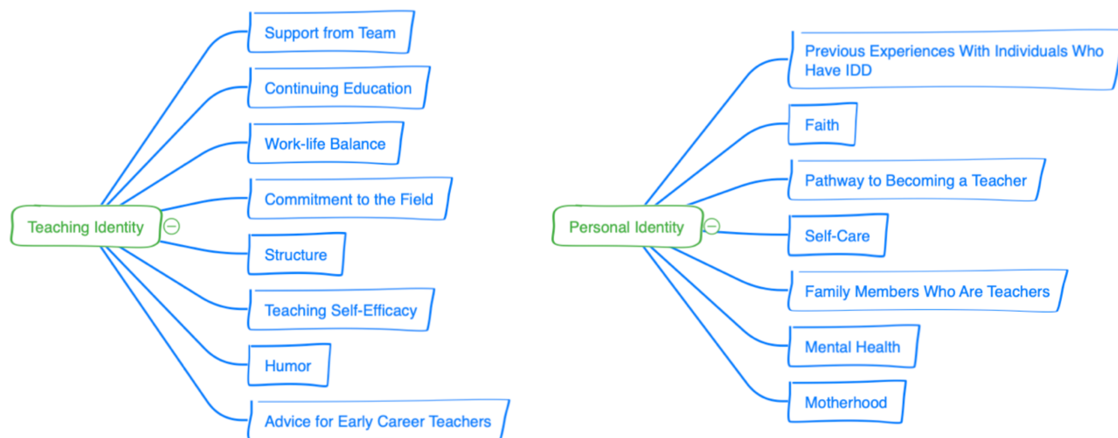
Second round of coding. Next, I collapsed initial codes into a second round of codes, after identifying patterns and potential themes. I sorted evidence, patterns, and themes while engaging in weekly peer debriefings and meetings with my advisor. During these sessions, I would present visuals and tables created, explain themes, and receive feedback. As a visual person, I relied on reports from Dedoose software as well as my own tables, sketches, and presentations. I consolidated my tables and visuals to fit each of my two research questions.

The First research question was "How do experienced teachers of students with IDD describe how their teaching identities have and continue to evolve, including how they view

themselves as educators?” Based on data and analysis throughout the second round of coding I identified two categories under which all other topics nested, 1) teaching identity, and 2) personal identity [See Figure 5].

Figure 5

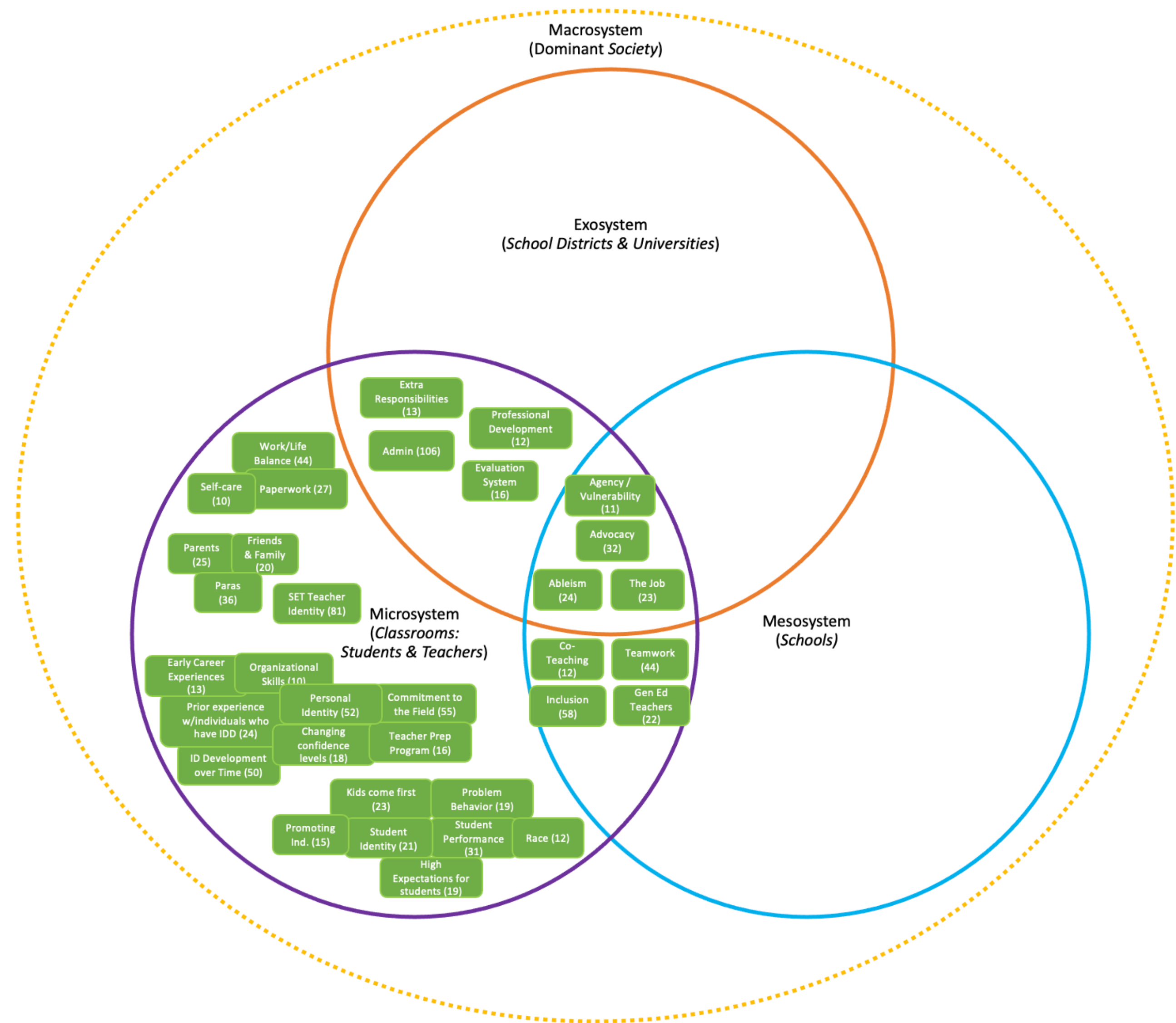
Coding Tree for Round 2, Research Question 1



My second research question asked how teachers navigate factors, such as key relationships and job responsibilities, across ecological micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro systems that uphold dominant systems of oppression. For this question, I used Dedoose generated tables and Excel spreadsheets to evaluate and collapse the most utilized codes throughout all interviews into a Venn diagram depicted in Figure 6. I identified themes which fit either in the microsystem (classroom level) or where the microsystem overlapped with the exosystem (school district level) and mesosystem (school level). For example, evidence about working with paraprofessionals fell into the microsystem circle because it was only talked about within the context of the classroom. Contrastingly, evidence related to relationship with administrators occurred in both conversations about the school district and the classroom levels.

Figure 6

Coding Visual for Round 2, Question 2



Timeline. Data for this project was collected between December 2020 and March 2020, allowing for sufficient time to analyze data, adapt protocols, and wallow in the data between each interview simultaneously. During the final stages of data collection, an extra interview was conducted based on findings from interviews one and two and artifact 1. The timetable for data collection is depicted in Table 4.

Table 4

Data Collection Timeline

Date	Teacher	Activity	Modality
December 4, 2019	T2	Interview 1	In Person
December 12, 2019	T1	Interview 1	Online
December 14, 2019	T3	Interview 1	Online
January 11, 2020	T3	Interview 2	In Person
January 14, 2020	T5	Interview 1	Phone
January 27, 2020	T2	Interview 2	In Person
January 27, 2020	T4	Interview 1	In Person
February 1, 2020	T3	Interview 3	In Person
February 6, 2020	T1	Interview 2	Online
February 12, 2020	T5	Interview 2	Phone
February 17, 2020	T2	Interview 3	In Person
February 28, 2020	T4	Interview 2	In Person
March 2, 2020	T5	Interview 3	Phone
March 4, 2020	T1	Interview 3	Online
March 27, 2020	T4	Interview 3	Online

Trustworthiness and Credibility

I strengthened trustworthiness and credibility of my findings using multiple strategies including data triangulation, peer debriefing, prolonged field engagement, and member checks (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2015).

Data Triangulation

Triangulation is the process wherein the credibility of research increases based on the analyzing of multiple data sources (Merriam et al., 2016). Stake (2010) defines triangulation as the process of gathering data and critically reviewing what is said in that data to prevent misinterpretation. Simultaneous data analysis procedures allowed me to engage in data triangulation routinely as I searched for similar meanings across category lists, coding trees, sketches, tables, and artifacts. I used my time during peer debriefings and meetings with my

advisor to review the data from multiple perspectives. This process helped ensure the validity of my assertions throughout both coding cycles.

Peer Debriefing

Collaborating with peers may help to discover better connections within the actual data sets. For example, the process of peer debriefs allows the researcher to articulate internal thinking processes and possibly make new insights (Merriam et al., 2016). In order to make sense of this data, I engaged in a minimum of weekly dialogue with peers for seven months as I engaged in analysis. In one peer debrief, I was analyzing codes related to teacher's commitment to the field, so I sketched multiple drawings and described my findings. She was not clear on how my participants' commitment levels changed over time based on my original sketches and data tables. I then made several alterations, and that is where I got the idea to ask the question in interview 3 as to how many days out of a 180-day school year did the participant consider leaving the field. Throughout peer debriefs I discussed timelines, coding trees, analyzed interviews, further defined codes, added and collapsed codes, created tables, sketched evidence, and summarized findings. We also consulted together about logistics such as interviewing techniques, scheduling tips, data analysis tools, and so on. I also met weekly with my advisor to share and discuss memos, diagrams of relationships and patterns in the data that I saw, and data saturation tables.

Prolonged Field Engagement

Another way to ensure a level of reliability is to conduct data collection over time to capture variances in the data and actively look for evidence that supports alternative explanations for a given phenomenon (Merriam et al., 2016). Merriam et al. (2016) suggests that one way to evaluate if enough time has passed during data collection is for evidence of data saturation, when

one hears repeats in the data and no new information emerges. This proved critical for one participant who at the beginning of interviews demonstrated a strong commitment to the field but after time passed, her commitment levels wavered. This information would not have been gleaned without prolonged field engagement.

Member Checks

As researchers, our own experiences and bias can influence our interpretation of the data, which can be mitigated through member checks (Merriam et al., 2016). Member checks involve allowing participants to listen to or read interpretations of their data with hopes they will rule out the possibility of misinterpretation. At the beginning of the second and third interviews, I asked participants to review my interpretations of their data from the previous interviews and provide feedback. I also submitted each completed chapter to my advisor who provided ongoing feedback on my analysis and developing findings. Throughout data analysis and writing process, I sent follow-up emails with questions about demographics, clarifying quotes, and asking for feedback on my assumptions.

Researcher Reflexivity

The concept of reflexivity refers to how researchers' positionality is shaped by their values and interests (Dávila, 2015). My background, biases, and beliefs influenced my interpretations of the data from this study. By being transparent about my positionality, I aim to aid in the reader in coming to their own interpretations of this research.

My background. I earned my Master of Arts in Teaching from a small, Christian liberal arts university on the west coast of the United States while working as a paraprofessional with students who have IDD. Once becoming a teacher, I instructed students from kindergarten through fifth grade with IDD in self-contained settings. I felt unprepared for the role as a special

education teacher and struggled to balance instructing students, advocating for equal access to instructional materials, and extensive paperwork. I went back to school while teaching and became a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA). While this additional education provided me with enhanced instructional and behavioral management strategies, I still grappled with teaching in a self-contained context.

As part of my role, I frequently advocated for students' rights, resulting in tense relationships with administrators. Through these experiences, I adopted the very *us/them* terminology that I find problematic in others because it perpetuates segregation and inequality. In my resistance to the daily exclusionary practices against *my* students, I perpetuated segregated attitudes by referring to students as *my* students (i.e., individuals with (dis)abilities) against *them* (i.e., non-(dis)abled individuals in the school). Throughout data collection, analysis, and presentation of my findings I consciously noticed, named, and disrupted my impulse to use us/them terminology.

Acknowledging my reflexivity. Furthermore, my identity as a Christian white female non-(dis)abled former teacher yielding the intellectual property of *smartness,* with educational markers such as a Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral Candidate status, may serve as a barrier to understanding the experiences of multiply marginalized individuals with (dis)abilities. Throughout my teaching career, I unknowingly evaded and even perpetuated racist and ableist systems of oppression. For example, I used to not consider how racism colluded with ableism when advocating for equal access to learning materials, curriculum, and access to general education settings for my students. When preparing for, conducting, and analyzing this study I aimed to identify the ways that both racism and ableism were operating in the stories shared by teachers. I also strove to walk alongside teachers of students with IDD by asking questions and

being open to responses, keeping in mind that my own position as a researcher with the social capital of *smartness* may influence their responses. I was open with and receptive to participants in this work by positioning myself as learning alongside special education teachers and their students rather than as an expert over them. For example, participants often asked if they gave the right answer after answering interview questions. I would remind them that *they* are the experts and there are no *wrong* answers, while thanking them for their openness in responding.

Given the reality that our current teaching force consists mostly of female, white non-(dis)abled teachers (Billingsley et al., 2018), I hope to urge educators to think deeply about current special education structures that perpetuate oppression of children who are multiply marginalized. To do this, I asked questions about the multiply marginalized identities of the participants' students. As a white Christian non-(dis)abled woman, I acknowledge that I hold an *insider* and *outsider* perspective while conducting research. On one hand, I was a white, female, former teacher which by all purposes should make me an insider. On the other hand, I am currently a representative of the academic community as well as a person who actively left the teaching field, making me an outsider. I openly discussed these conflicting identities with participants throughout data collection.

What also influences my research are my experiences and observations teaching Children of Color, children who experience poverty, and children with IDD in a self-contained classroom and working with their families. I witnessed and struggled against the frequent and consistent discrimination of my students with IDD ranging from overt exclusion to covert microaggressions. Only by naming one's own positionality and access to privilege capital, can

individuals avoid mimicking and reproducing their (un)conscious[6] behavior which can undermine work towards true equity for *all* children (Morgan, 1996).

Lastly, my identity as a Christian woman influences how I chose to work with individuals who have IDD as a *calling* in addition to a career. While my research questions did not directly examine my participants' religious or spiritual beliefs, the topic of faith arose organically from two participants who also identify as Christian. As a researcher, it was important to allow participants to discuss their identities, including their religious beliefs if they wanted to share, while remaining open to identify how our shared or different beliefs impacted my data collection and analysis.

Minimizing my reflexivity and bias in this study. When writing and presenting findings, I requested feedback from my advisor and dissertation committee as well as participants to ensure that I represented and interpreted teachers and their students in ways that remained socially just and promoted a critically inclusive lens. First, I routinely engaged in member checks to ensure that I represented the voices of my participants accurately. When conducting member checks, I summarized each interview in a list of bullet points and reviewed with the participant at the subsequent interview. I also sent emails asking for clarification throughout the process. Second, I sought feedback from colleagues, friends, and professionals regarding my protocols. While reading my protocols, I asked volunteer special education teachers to narrate their perception of each question as they read through the protocols. Prompting questions included, (a) what was the first thing that comes to mind about the

[6] I use the term (un)conscious with parenthesis to emphasize that many individuals defend continued oppressive actions due to a lack of awareness, especially regarding microaggressions. By creating this visual separation, I challenge this belief and therefore, ask the reader to examine whether this behavior is in fact (un)conscious.

question? (b) How did it make you feel as an educator? (c) Were any of these questions evoking vulnerability? (d) Did you feel comfortable answering these questions? and (e) Were there other questions you wished I had asked which better illustrate your critically inclusive teaching lens? Lastly, I met weekly with colleagues, over the span of seven months, to analyze data and share and discuss initial themes and findings.

CHAPTER 4: CASE STUDIES

The purpose of this chapter is to describe each of the five teacher cases. I will talk about the ways that their teaching identities have and continue to evolve, including how they view themselves as educators. I identified themes in the data across the following categories, (a) participants' personal identity, (b) special education teaching identity, (c) each educators' overall commitment to the field of special education and (d) their advice for new teachers. In Chapter 5, I will discuss how teachers navigate factors, such as key relationships and job responsibilities, across ecological micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro systems. Using the interview and artifact data shared by participants, I have interpreted how these special education teachers have and continue to develop their identities, while observing their ever-changing commitment to the field of special education. Participant demographics are summarized in Table 2. I defined identity based on the theoretical framework depicted by Holland et al. (1998), organizing evidence into figured worlds in both the personal and teaching environments. The following chapter describes the figured worlds I observed. Most participants did not talk about their racial identities, including the participant who identified as "mixed" race. Instead, teachers seemed to focus heavily on the ableism their students experienced on a daily basis rather than other axis of oppression such as race, socioeconomic status, and gender. Their teaching and personal identities were closely connected, and they often demonstrated difficulty separating the two figured worlds.

April

April was in her fourth year of teaching in a middle school self-contained classroom after serving four years as a paraprofessional with students who have intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). April identifies as a white woman who was 32 years old at the time of the interview. At Merion Middle School, her classroom consisted of 10 students with ID from sixth

to eighth grades. We discussed her personal identity which included experiences with family members who were also teachers, previous experience with individuals who have IDD, and her use of visual supports and mementos throughout her home and classroom. This case will also describe the process she underwent to become a teacher, transitioning to her teaching identity. These experiences influenced April's decision to become a teacher and also shaped how she positioned students as her central focus. When presented with challenges, April maintains this focus on how the kids in her classroom come first. Her teaching identity is founded on her belief in helping individuals with IDD and her desire to walk alongside her students. As she gained experience her self-efficacy improved and she developed a work-life balance. Lastly, April's sense of humor played a role in her day-to-day teaching and team building practice. As April's personal and teaching identities evolved, her commitment to special education increased.

Personal Identity

April's stepmother, a social worker, inspired her decision to teach and her support in becoming an educator. Experiences with individuals who have (dis)abilities in her personal life contributed to her drive to provide education and opportunities to her students. She promotes important aspects of her personal identity with a plethora of artifacts which she displays throughout her classroom and home [picture not shown because of identifiable information]. In her current role, she is fully committed to remaining a special education teacher for the foreseeable future.

Teaching in the Family

Teaching and providing services for children was part of April's family culture as several individuals were teachers, paraprofessionals, or social workers. Having these professionals in her family provided April with inspiration to join the field and support throughout the process. April

cited encouragement from her aunt, father, and stepmother as pivotal during her early career, "My aunt, the teacher …I mean without her I wouldn't be where I'm at" (April Interview 3). Aprils' father taught in an Emotional Behavioral Disorders (EBD) classroom for most of his career, "So back in the day he used to work with kids with emotional behavioral disturbances. So he was really supportive!" (April Interview 3). Her aunt, who was a paraprofessional, and stepmother were cited as the two people helping her remain committed to the field, "But she [stepmother] continually supports me and, I think understands the perspectives, like when we [aunt, stepmother, and April] talk about things or challenging things, they could be like, yeah, that sucks but you're doing great!" (April Interview 3). Having family members familiar with both social work and teaching allowed April to access support for the unique aspects of the job.

Previous Experiences with Individuals Who Have IDD

While April has outside influence from the professional side of special education, she also finds inspiration from individuals in her family with IDD. April's mom's boyfriend has a brother, Dan, who has a (dis)ability. While she explained that Dan has a loving family who takes care of his basic needs, she expressed concerns about his limited opportunities and access to the community:

> I feel like Dan's life would have been so much more fulfilling and given him so much more happiness if he had had those chances versus sitting at home (April Interview 3).

In addition to her experiences with Dan, April has a brother with autism, Trevor. She attributes Trevor's success in part to his access to early interventions, especially school, unlike Dan. She explained, "I would say that his [Trevor's] quality of life is like a hundred-fold better, and easier because of that" (April Interview 3). Having a brother on the spectrum motivates April to help individuals with disabilities achieve independence and purpose in their lives:

It made me want to work with people with intellectual disabilities because at least at that time it was still very widely like just unknown… I want to make people understand that they just like everybody else need to be given a chance or whatever. And so that motivated me too" (April Interview 3).

Use of Visual Supports and Mementos

Early in April's career she demonstrated a coping strategy for preventing and managing stress through ample visual supports at home and school. When asked to bring an artifact representing her personal identity, April lifted a bag to the table containing many items, (a) stuffed bull, (b) stuffed turtle, (c) Snoopy figurine, (d) picture of her brother with autism and mother, (e) African rhinoceros statue, (f) dinosaur statue, (g) picture of letters and cards from students and colleagues, (h) a picture of minions her students colored to represent her, (i) classroom mural, and (j) two personal collages [Photos were too identifiable to be shown].

Each artifact had a story demonstrating deep personal meaning and was prominently displayed in her home or classroom. In one example, the stuffed bull, Ferdinand, represents her value of being her true self, "He is a bull that just wants to be peaceful, which, you know, it's not a stereotypical bull. So, the story is about all the bulls around him being like, 'Why don't you want to be like us?' He's like, 'I just want to sit calmly and smell the roses, the flowers and whatever.' And so it's about, you know, being yourself like being okay with that" (April Interview 3). In another example, the turtle reminds her of a vacation in Hawaii where she got to swim with turtles and observe their resiliency and strength. She describes how they would try to eat off of large rocks while waves kept knocking them and beating them against the stones, "…But they are so resilient and strong… They're just like I don't care! I got to eat and so they're

going to do whatever they have to do kind of thing" (April Interview 3). Each figure includes a story demonstrating her strong sense of personal identity and resilience.

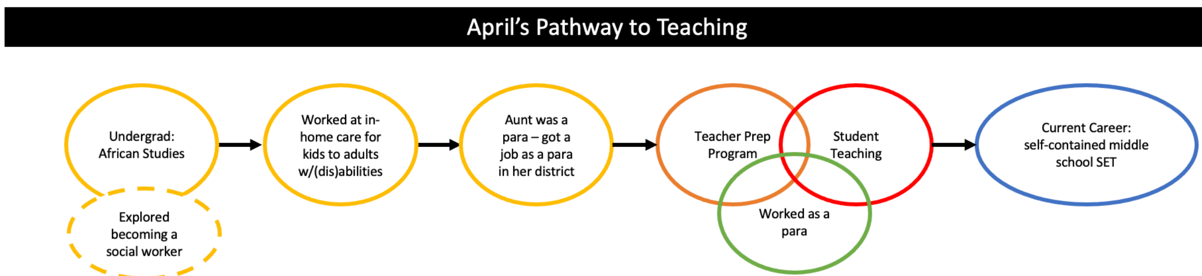
In the last example, murals and collages demonstrate her overwhelming positivity and desire to help others. For example, the world mural with the words "Somewhere inside all of us is the power to change her world," was painted by a student and art teacher on her classroom wall, "…This is like my favorite quote in the whole world and it's in my classroom more than once" (April Interview 3). As April shared artifacts demonstrating her personal identity, the line between personal and teaching identity blurred. All of these objects were prominently displayed in both her home and classroom because she appreciates visual reminders of the driving forces in her life. Her personal identity factors and experiences influenced her decision to become a teacher.

Pathway to Becoming a Teacher

April took a less traditional route to becoming a teacher. She received her undergraduate degree in an unrelated field and found teaching after becoming an in-home care worker as shown in Figure 7. With the support from her family, April eventually transitioned to teaching. Initially, April knew that she had a desire to help people and applied to a university's social work undergraduate program but was rejected. She pivoted and instead majored in political science and minored in African studies. Despite not getting into the social work program, April demonstrated resilience in finding another area of study and completing her undergraduate degree.

Figure 7

April's Pathway to Becoming a Special Education Teacher



After graduating with her Bachelor's degree in Political Science and Minor in African studies, April chose a job that involved caring for other individuals working for two years at an in-home care company with adults who had (dis)abilities and elderly individuals. At the time, one of April's aunts worked as a paraprofessional in the transition program with adults with IDD and suggested April apply to one of the school districts' open positions. Thanks to the support of her Aunt, April applied and got the paraprofessional job. While April worked as a paraprofessional, she attended a large urban university to obtain a Master's degree. April received encouragement and support from her university cohort and family.

Special Education Teaching Identity

April's teaching identity was reflected in the three signs she posted at the back of her classroom. She explained, "So they're not a distraction for anybody, but I see them all the time. Um and I think I like to stare at them all the time. Like this is why I'm here." (April Interview 1). Each of the three signs have one word which read, (a) humor, (b) equity, and (c) helping others. Helping others proves to be more about her beliefs in holding students to high expectations. Equity referred to equal treatment of her students by herself and other teachers. Lastly, humor was an important coping tool that allowed April to laugh in difficult circumstances. Additional

facets of Aprils' teaching identity identified in the data include her emphasis on creating work-life balance and her commitment to the field.

Beliefs in Helping Others

When asked about her teaching identity, April said the first thing that came to mind, "High expectations for my students, because I want them to be their best selves," and noted that she finds greatest career satisfaction when kids are pushed to "aha moments" (April Interview 1). I asked April about her teaching identity during the first and second interviews, but it was not until the third interview where she described how her past experiences and relationships with Dan and Trevor fueled her beliefs in her own self-efficacy and motivated her to maintain high expectations for students. Because of these relationships, April views her students for their strengths rather than perceived weaknesses, and encourages them to achieve high benchmarks, inside and outside of the classroom:

> "I think at first it was really hard, because people around me, not in the field, but like other teachers and whatnot, don't necessarily view some of my students the way I do. And it was really, really hard…I did succeed in pushing other adults in the way they view things and, having my students like participate in cross country even though people were like, 'They can't do that,' you know? And seeing how happy they were when they did, it was like, again, solidified how I felt. Like, 'No, this is the right thing.' Like, 'I am gonna be their advocate and, I don't care [laughs]'" (April Interview 3).

April's belief in promoting independence and positive outcomes for students was further reflected in a poster she keeps in her classroom which read, "We are here to create a comfortable, safe, fun, & caring learning environment working on helping students become their

most independent selves [Smiley face].” The poster reminds her every day of her goals of creating a safe learning environment for students to achieve independence.

Student Identity – Equity

April’s describes her deep desire to help students as *giving of herself*, “I love to help people. Which doesn't always mean like, I'm on the upper hand or whatever, helping, but I like to give myself to people” (April Interview 2). She is careful to clarify, “I feel like sometimes helping others, depending on who you are, could come across like, ‘I know how to do it, and you don't, so I'm gonna help you,’ but, in my mind, I'm just giving myself” (April Interview 2). When April first started teaching, she had a self-professed hero complex where she wanted to help everyone and had idealistic expectations, “Oh, I’m gonna help everybody. It's gonna be amazing!” (April Interview 1). She explained how her beliefs changed overtime by providing a example of how a student calls her his friend, “For me at least, because I don't feel like I'm saving them. I feel like I just, I feel like (laughs)…like one of my students always puts his arm around me and he's like ‘friend’ (April Interview 1). She went on to explain how she views her role as less of an authority over the students and more of a person walking alongside them, “I probably borderline that line of like too friendly sometimes. You know, like I should be maybe more like ‘I’m your teacher’” (April Interview 1). April now pushes back against savior norms, working alongside students, often joking together and acting more as teammates than the traditional top-down teacher student power dynamics. She describes jumping up and bumping shoulders with student like football players,

> “Because I, I don't want them to ever feel like I'm an authoritative figure that's telling them what they need to do and what they need to say. And, you know, that I have all the knowledge. Because I don't believe that. I don't think I have all the knowledge. I think I

have tidbits, you know, that will help them. And, and I want them to learn those. And so, I try to make more of a partnership. Like, "Hey, I'm not telling you this because I think that it's a good thing to know. I'm telling you because it's a safety concern" (AT Int. 1)

April recognizes that students with (dis)abilities are often marginalized and she actively pushes against her teacher privilege by attempting to walk in solidarity with her students.

Self-efficacy

As April's teaching identity developed over time in regard to her relationships with students, her own self-efficacy developed. When April first started teaching, she described regularly questioning her ability and belonginess in a classroom setting. Over the years, she has learned to be satisfied with her best efforts, "…Which I think maybe now I'm finally coming to the conclusion that, as long as I'm giving my best, that's all that I can do. And, that's good enough. You know, like, because I feel like I do try really hard" (April Interview 1). By acknowledging and giving credit to herself for efforts above all else, she is able to overcome her insecurities in the classroom setting.

Work-Life Balance

Developing a strong self of teaching self-efficacy allowed April to also set boundaries for work so that she could achieve a healthy work-life balance. The special education teacher role includes a plethora of paperwork and other responsibilities that April acknowledged as overwhelming at times, "It's exhausting. I'm not gonna lie. I come home and I'm exhausted" (April Interview 1). To prevent burnout, April strives to maintain a work-life balance to allow time for rest and rejuvenation, "I think a huge piece of keeping going is self-care. And I see that a lot with all teachers, not just Special Ed, but self-care. Like, if we don't take care of ourselves then we're nothing to our kids, because we're like giving them the, you know, absolute worst of

ourselves, which is never good" (April Interview 1). Once again, April's overall focus on her students' wellbeing remains her greatest motivator. She uses self-care and practical tools such as setting timers and making lists to maintain balance in her life.

Self-care for April includes a healthy sleep routine, yoga, and leaving work in the classroom. When April first started teaching, she would stay for long hours in her classroom. Now in her fourth-year teaching, she explains that this is the first time she has refrained from taking work home with her,

> Like, I just stay at school if I need to get something done and then I leave it. I don't bring it home. That helps me a ton. So I would say for me, those are the things for self-care-wise, that sleep, not bringing it at home. And like for me like knowing that I, I do put everything I got every day at school (April Interview 1).

Taking care of herself supports her commitment to the field, which is a different approach than she took in her early career, "I was taking work home, and then, would get to school and just be like, 'Fuck, like I'm so done. Like, I don't wanna do this.' So, unless I like absolutely have to, I don't take work home" (April Interview 2). April demonstrates pride for how her practices have shifted overtime, "I haven't really done a whole lot of work at home, so I'm pretty proud of that, because that never used to be the case. I don't stay as late. I have a timer for myself" (April Interview 2). She then goes on to explain her use of a timer to stay on track:

> I try to set a timer so, legally, like per our contract, I can leave at 3:40. So, my timer is between 4 and 4:30. Like, that's when I need to be thinking, 'Wrap it up, and leave.' That has helped me immensely too. Like, setting that specific time and actually holding to it, because I will tell you, like that, the first couple years, I was just god-awful, and I would stay until like 6 o'clock (April Interview 2).

When asked how her ability to create boundaries around her workload has shifted across time, April explained that she grew to accept that it was impossible to complete every task as an educator, “I feel like as a teacher, you can never complete everything, because there's always something else. Like, grades are coming up, but I can't do them yet, but I got IEPs due right now, so, you know” (April Interview 2). She explained how she prioritizes using lists on top of lists:

> I think accepting that I'm not going to finish everything ever, and, which sounds silly, probably, but, I mean, it's really hard. Like, I'm super OCD, and I'm a list person. I like to cross things off my list, and so sometimes like, and I make mad lists, like all the time. And, then I re-order lists, and I'll like number them, and that helps too, because, you know, maybe one day, this was like your first priority and you got a little done, but then the next day, that's not your top priority… (April Interview 2).

The tools and strategies April has developed help her balance and keep her personal and professional worlds separated.

Humor

Work-life balance is a critical skill that April has developed over time, while humor is something that remains constant in her teaching career. April is able to find humor in the face of challenging situations, “So, you can make anything funny if you try. And, I think humor is one of the easiest ways to take these challenging things that we deal with on a daily basis” (April Interview 2). She provided examples of how humor helps with stressful scenarios:

> “Yeah. Well, it's, I actually think it's made life better because, you, what, for me, like it's given me appreciation for the silly and gross and all that stuff part of life, but it is part of life. So why not laugh at it [laughs]? Because if not, we're gonna lose our minds [laughs] (April Interview 1).

April also described how humor can help her and her classroom staff respond to challenging behavior:

> When problem behavior happens, she uses humor to cope and bring her team together, Behaviors that happen… We make jokes about us as a unit, like, my paras and I. And, we make jokes about, not mean jokes, but like jokes that, 'Nobody else could do this job in the school,' or like, 'Well, they don't know what it's like,' and things like that to build our team, you know?" (April Interview 2)

April acknowledged that humor provides a coping strategy for situations outside of her classroom as well. She explained how she uses humor for conflicts outside of her classroom, "Because sometimes it's hard to control what the rest of the school is doing…But, when we make jokes about it, it makes it better, and it builds our team, like as a cohesive unit. Like, we're in this together" (April Interview 2).

Commitment to the Field

Creating work-life balance, overcoming insecurity, and conquering feelings of isolation are challenges April has worked through which have strengthened her resolve to remain in the field of teaching. As the only special education teacher in her building, April has often felt insecure and isolated. Without another special education teacher to support her she struggles with feeling inadequate and lonely, "I just go back to like the insecurity thing and the isolation, especially the isolation. I just tell myself over and over like, 'Sure, this maybe sucks for you and it feels really isolating to you, but you're not here for you. You're here for the kids" (April Interview 1). In the end, April remains committed to her students and puts their well-being above her own feelings, often staring at the signs in her classroom as reminders to keep working to help students.

As April's teaching and personal identities have developed over time, her commitment to the field has also been strengthened. When asked how many days out of a 180 in a school year, did she seriously consider quitting, she replied 50 days in her early career but only three days in her current year of teaching (April Interview 3). April explained that there are always challenging times during a job, but her first year was especially hard and she contemplated quitting frequently due to low self-efficacy, "Probably a lot. It was accompanied by you're terrible at your job and you don't know what the hell you're doing. So with those two it was like, oh God, um, I dunno. Probably 50 [days she considered quitting]" (April Interview 3). As April became more comfortable in her role, she still had occasional moments where she wanted to leave the field, but they were always closely followed with reminders that she plans to continue teaching, "You know my first thought would be like, God I can't do this anymore. And then my second thought is but I don't want to do anything else!" (April Interview 3). Her enthusiasm for teaching is shown in the positive ways she describes her journey and in the words of advice she has for the next teaching generation.

Advice for New Teachers

As April has progressed in her career, she has overcome many challenges including feelings of insecurity and isolation. She has also set boundaries and developed a work-life balance. Currently, April finds herself shifting roles from the novice to expert teacher, and is now able to provide advice for beginning teachers. She advises early career teachers to accept the challenges of the first year, and to refrain from comparing it to other years of teaching, "Because your first year is going to be crazy and you're going to put way more hours in than you ever thought imaginable. But that's just the first year" (April Interview 3). Second, she notes that engaging in self-care is a requirement, "…Self-care is way more important than you could ever

know. So please, please, please, please, please make a list of what helps you [future teachers] maintain your self care and stick to it!” (April Interview 3). Lastly, she advises that a classroom team needs to be strong. She emphasizes the need to build relationships with your colleagues, especially paraprofessionals and IEP team members, “Your team in your classroom needs to be really strong. So put the time in to build it in the beginning of the year before school starts or you'll regret that” (April Interview 3). She does not hesitate when providing advice to early career teachers which demonstrates her increased confidence and shift from novice to experienced special education teacher.

Monique

For 14 years, Monique has worked with individuals who have (dis)abilities in self-contained settings. From 1987 to 1994, Monique worked as a special education teacher before taking time off to raise her family and then returning to the classroom in 2013. Her current classroom includes 10 students from Kindergarten to second grade. Six of her students are diagnosed with autism, one with the Down syndrome, and three are young enough to have the Developmental Disabilities eligibility category. Monique identifies as a white woman who was 54 years old at the time of the interview. She demonstrates a strong commitment to the field that has spanned across multiple life-stages. As a self-identified Catholic woman, Monique shared that her faith guides all that she does, but she keeps it hidden while at work, which sometimes creates tension between her personal and teaching identities.

Personal Identity

Monique described her faith and her family, as the most important aspects of her life. Monique talked openly about how much she worries about her children despite the fact they are adults now, “I pray a lot for my kids…with my kids being adults you never stop worrying about

your kids" (Monique Interview 3). Her young child has a reoccurring health situation, but rather than be discouraged, Monique prays for him often. Concern for her son's well-being, both in regards to his health and school work [he was in college at the time of the interview] was apparent, but she repeatedly pointed out how her faith keeps her grounded during life challenges, "It just keeps me rooted" (Monique Interview 3). In this example, Monique points to her faith as foundation while also demonstrating through her story how her role as a mother is an important part of her identity. Her road to becoming a teacher involved changing career paths and taking time off to be a parent before returning to the classroom again.

Faith

When asked to share a personal artifact, Monique hesitated, asking multiple times if it was okay to present something personal in nature before unveiling her artifact. I assured her it was okay; that I had asked her to bring *anything* that represented her personal identity. She then drew a Rosary out of her bag, gently placing it before me on the table (shown in Figure 8). She explained, "It's very much a way of prayer. You don't have to use a Rosary for prayer, it's just to guide you along. If you're saying 10 Hail Mary's, you know, but it gives me concentration when I'm praying out loud" (Monique Interview 1). As she described her teaching career and current position, she added comments that reflected how her faith and beliefs informed her commitment to working with individuals with (dis)abilities. She also shared how her faith keeps her marriage and friendships strong, "…Our faith, it's been really, really important to, you know, help keeping your marriage going really well" (Monique Interview 3). While faith is an important facet of Monique's personal identity, she acknowledged that she must keep her faith quiet in the classroom, "…I have it [faith], but then I have to keep it separate. But I can't be that far away from it, if that makes any sense" (Monique Interview 3).

Figure 8

A Rosary Depicted Her Personal Identity

Previous Experiences with Individuals Who Have IDD

Monique shared how her relationships in her personal life motivated her interest in working with individuals with disabilities. Specifically, Monique described a relationship with a family friend, Rose, an individual with IDD, “When she sees me, she jumps up and down. She's so excited to see me!” (Monique Interview 3). Monique described how her interactions with Rose gave her practice for understanding her current students with IDD by learning about Rose’s strengths and challenges, “But they [children with IDD] can handle some things and not some other things. So, it really made me realize that and notice things they *could* handle and grasp on to those things that they can't handle, so they can be more successful” (Monique Interview 3). She used this ability to identify strengths and areas for growth throughout her career.

Motherhood

Monique shared several examples of how her own identity as a mother influenced her interactions with students and families. For example, Monique described one of her students with severe challenging behavior and limited verbal communication skills. The child demonstrated signs of abuse and neglect and multiple caregivers in the child’s life had reported the situation to Child Protective Services (CPS). Monique was interviewed by CPS, along with other parties, and as a result the child was removed from home and placed into foster care. After the child had been removed from the home, Monique struggled not to let the event consume her thoughts, “And it

was going to be that weekend, and I thought about it all weekend because I thought about the family as well too, just because it was difficult for them to lose a child" (Monique Interview 1). Monique struggled to distance herself from this situation, "I had to keep telling myself that, 'It's not my child.' It's still something that was, I've had to do something to get separation from. You know?" (Monique Interview 1). She went on to explain how her personal identity as a mother was difficult to put aside while remaining in the teacher role,

> Because I am a mother, you know so I, I felt for her in that way. But there was still a sense of I had to keep myself separated from it. You know to keep strong enough for my own family, to keep strong enough for being a teacher to the rest of the kids (Monique Interview 1).

Motherhood is a pillar of Monique's personal identity that sometimes influences how she views her students and thinks about her role as a teacher. She makes conscious efforts to separate her role as a mother from how she responds to situations professionally, similar to how she aims to keep her faith separated from the classroom setting.

Pathway to Becoming a Teacher

Growing up, Monique wanted to be a nurse like her mother and attended a nursing program for her first semester of college. She was committed to helping people and originally thought she wanted to be in the medical field, particularly in pediatrics. She still shows an interest in nursing whenever a student has medical issues, "You have to send them to the school nurse or whatever's going on, I'm always interested to know, you know, what is it? What's behind it? What caused it?" (Monique Interview 3). One of her greatest fears is having a child die, which she's experienced in her professional life in her church community, "That would be heartbreaking…to see something like that happen to a child. So that's the last thing I want to

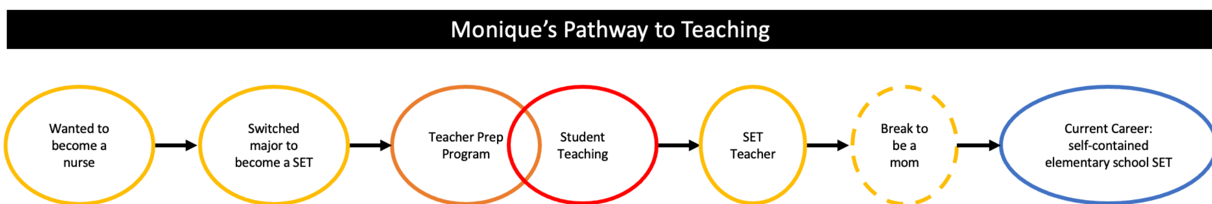
see" (Monique Interview 3). This fear of a patient dying contributed to her decision to switch to becoming a teacher after her first semester:

> I was worried about being a nurse, is what would I be like in an emergency situation, health situation? You know, would I freeze, or would I get used to it? That type of thing. So, I didn't give it [nursing] as much of a chance as maybe I should. But that- that was my, that was my issue (Monique Interview 3).

Rather than become a nurse, Monique pursued teaching (as displayed in Figure 9).

Figure 9

Monique's Pathway to Becoming a Special Education Teacher



As she explored teaching, Monique worried that general education would not be enough of a challenge, so she decided to pursue working with students with disabilities. While some participating teachers in this study became teachers because of the people they met with disabilities in the community, Monique pursued special education because she noticed that very few individuals with (dis)abilities were in the community and was concerned by their absence, "Not that it's not challenging to be an elementary school teacher, but more the challenge of special needs. That's what made me change my mind. And- and the fact that I hadn't seen people in the community that had special needs" (Monique Interview 3). Monique graduated with a degree in both elementary and special education.

Special Education Teaching Identity

With her faith as her foundation, Monique's identity as a teacher revolves around her desire for structure and teamwork. Monique explained that her ability to maintain a structured classroom was something she learned early on in her career and maintains as a coping skill. However, her focus on teamwork developed later on in her career as her teaching identity evolved. Monique took a break from teaching for 19 years to raise four children, which resulted in a large career gap. She described how coming back to teaching after such a long break was challenging, but Monique overcame these challenges by relying on her team. Lastly, Monique demonstrates a strong work-life balance, leaving work in the classroom and spending evenings and weekends with her family.

Structure

Monique describes how structure is important to both her students, and herself, "I have to have a structure. Not only for the kids who have special needs, but for myself. To, a standard of knowing what's coming next" (Monique Interview 1). She has prioritized structure since the beginning of her teaching career, "So, I learned that from the very beginning, that's the way I've been. I have, to have a structure every day and know what it's comprised of. And having the kids know what comes next" (Monique Interview 1). One of the artifacts Monique shared as representative of her teaching identity was made using Boardmaker® (see Figure 10).

Figure 10

A Calendar Used at Circle Time that Represents Structure and Praise from Administration

First, this artifact illustrates her commitment in maintaining a structured classroom, which includes clear visual supports for her students and routines like circle time. Second, this visual was important because it was in response to feedback from a special education administrator who had visited her classroom. He wrote her a letter, which she shared, describing several things she was doing well in her classroom and offering additional suggestions. Monique shared that she welcomed praise from an administer with a special education background, “He came and observed, and I think it was like right at the beginning of the day where we had some free choice time and then we went into morning meeting. And so, he just observed a lot of different things” (Monique Interview 2). She went on to describe him as an advocate for her special education program, “He was a good team member because at the time he was advocating for the [special education program name]” (Monique Interview 2). Receiving praise and feedback from an administrator was especially meaningful because she had recently returned from her 19-year break from teaching. The message from the administrator renewed her teaching self-efficacy, “Especially since coming back into teaching that there's somebody else who's taught for a while could, see some things that I was doing that was already working, and then it...

Then he could also come up with next steps, because that was fine with me if he wanted to see the things that needed to be improved" (Monique Interview 2). The visual schedule was in response to one of his suggestions. She took pride in not only receiving praise, but also demonstrating that she can respond to feedback and create the materials upon request.

This schedule also illustrated Monique's ability to adapt to changing technology when she returned after her 19 year break, which she described as a challenge, "The biggest challenge was technology… I stopped in '94 when my first was born. Ah, we were having the kids use discs and stuff like that" (Monique Interview 1). She talked about how she came back and was expected to use different computer programs and create matrices for administrators,

> When I came back there were programs, and this program, and that program, and how to do matrices you know. And, and I was not used to that. So, it was a huge learning curve. I had to go through coming back in to teach (Monique Interview 1).

Monique overcame this challenge by working together with other teachers and paraprofessionals, "Well there's a saying that goes, 'You're only as good as the teacher next door.' So (laughs) I asked a lot of teachers around me because you know, any questions I had about the technology, to try to get in sync with that…But two of my paras are technology savvy so-" (Monique Interview 1). The paraprofessionals in Monique's classroom became the central teaching team which she relied on daily.

Working as a Team

Early in Monique's career she tried to work on her own as much as possible to demonstrate *smartness* by having all the answers and not asking for help. As she evolved in her role as a teacher her desire for teamwork increased and she cited her team as the number one reason for staying in the classroom:

> Oh, when I first got out of school, I felt like I needed to be, not exactly to know it all but, but to know enough to be able to do it by myself. But over time ah, and just learning with teaching, and I did have a big break in there. I had 19 years where I didn't teach but I had four kids and I was at home…So, not only aging, and having my own kids, but also realizing that you need to work with a team. It's much easier to work as a team than it is to try to do it by yourself. You know, rather to think you have all the answers (Monique Interview 1).

Monique credits maturing with age and becoming a mom as contributing to her evolving teaching identity and striving for increased collaboration with her special education team. Currently, Monique has bi-weekly meetings with her IEP team, including occupational and speech therapists. While she recognizes her leadership role as the head teacher in the IEP process, she emphasizes the importance of working with additional therapists, “I want all the goals to work for the kids. In conjunction with what their [therapists’] goals are, because some of them have all three you know PT, OT, and speech” (Monique Interview 1). While Monique values her IEP team, the paraprofessionals in her room are critical to her success. Whenever Monique described a challenging situation in the classroom, she brought up her paraprofessionals, “I can't do this by myself, so I need to have a team” (Monique interview 1). Her paraprofessionals continue to be her most cited source of support.

Work-Life Balance

By relying on her team, taking care of herself, and making sure to leave work in the classroom, Monique works towards work-life balance.

When Monique’s son needed surgery, she did not hesitate to take time off work because her family took priority, “Whether it’s a personal day or sick day or something like that…just for

example, my son's surgery, you know. That would take priority, I had to be off, you know, I didn't feel guilty at all" (Monique Interview 1). She explains that she does not use a lot of sick days for herself, "Because I hardly ever take sick days for myself. I'm not usually the one to call in sick" (Monique Interview 1). Monique's identity as a mother and the health of her kids and family take priority over her own needs. To learn more about how Monique engages in self-care, I asked Monique what she does for *only* herself and she responded, "Take care of me? I have a coffee every morning. (laughs). It's just more of a comfort thing, so. Yeah, it's like a treat to myself" (Monique Interview 1). The simple joy of getting coffee every morning gave Monique a sense of self-care.

Monique also makes sure to leave school at her contract end time each day, refraining from staying late, "I never stay late…When it's time to leave, I split, you know?" (Monique Interview 1). She reported that she is likely to come in early to get extra work done, but never stays late or works on weekends, "My husband, well now we're empty nest-ers…on the weekend we, we basically hang out just at home, but we sometimes see a movie and have dinner, and things like that sometimes" (Monique Interview 1). Monique prioritizes time with family when she is not working, which may contribute to her commitment to the field.

Commitment to the Field

Throughout Monique's career, she has considered leaving the field, remaining committed to teaching 180 out of 180 days in a school year. Despite facing many challenges in her career, especially after returning from a 19-year break, she plans to teach until she retires. When Monique described struggles, she spoke in short timeframes, saying that she wanted to go home for the day, but she always intended to arrive early the next morning to tackle challenges:

"I think it was just some days I was just like, 'I'm just want to go home. I don't want to think about this. You know and ah, I'll pick it up tomorrow morning when I feel fresh.' Or I'll say, 'I need to get together with my team again and talk again with that.' And I don't think I, I've had that feeling yet, where I felt like I really needed to just stop" (Monique Interview 1).

Rather than let one challenging situation build upon others, she appeared to take each individual circumstance as one instance to overcome, and then she moved on. Her unwavering commitment may be attributed to elements of her teaching and personal identities such as teamwork, faith, and an overall unwillingness to quit.

Monique described how her beliefs, specifically her faith, insulated her during challenging situations, "If I'm getting frustrated, I look at my own faith and try to get out of it. And, um, doing the right thing, you know?" (Monique Interview 3). Relying on her team also helps Monique remain in her job, "Use your team. Have a sense of humor. Um, and don't be afraid to take time for yourself if you can do it. If you can do it in a healthy way. Just try not to make it two days in a row (laughing)" (Monique Interview 3). By mentioning the two days, she is referring to a school district policy that allows a teacher to take time off for a certain number of days before requiring a doctor's note. Here she mentions humor as well as work-life balance.

In addition to her personal traits of hard work and maintaining boundaries with work, she also referenced her drive to "not quit" (Monique interview 1). She explained, "I don't like to quit, and so you know I don't want to say, 'I'm done you know with, with the whole shebang.'" She gave an example from her personal life where she refused to give up despite physical pain, even after her husband encouraged her to let it go. Despite pain and outside pressure, she did not waver from her goal, "I have that determination where I don't want to give up (Monique

Interview 1). Monique also demonstrated that she is willing to accept an outcome that might not meet her ideal, and not let perfection impact her commitment to the field, “And so, I went ahead and looked for ways to make it work, even if it doesn't work quite as well. Because I'm not looking for perfection” (Monique Interview 1). This ability to accept work that might not be exactly what was intended might be a protective factor shielding Monique from burnout.

Advice for New Teachers

As an experienced special education teacher, Monique emphasizes the need for early career teachers to rely on their team and not attempt perfection, “I talk within the team. You know, keep talking so we can get different perspectives … talk with the team. So the last thing you should do is keep something bottled up and explode later [Laughs]” (Monique Interview 3). She described the importance of collaborating with paraeducators, “As far as your paras, I've been very lucky. I really have been very, very lucky… you have to work with those people every day. You have to work with the kids every day. You need to have people in there that can handle it (Monique Interview 3). Lastly, Monique advises teachers to do the best job possible without striving for perfection, “You know, try to do the best job you can! And again, it's not perfect, but don't look for perfection um, but, but look to your team. And establish that right away” (Monique Interview 3). She recommended, “I would say celebrate what little you can have and see if you can ... The next year, if you're able to do a little bit more, or even if it takes a couple of years to do a little bit more after that” (Monique Interview 2). Monique’s words of advice demonstrate her optimism for the field and her belief in the generation of early career teachers to follow her.

Nathan

Nathan started his career in what his district referred to as life skills and then transitioned to a more resource room environment with students with (describe student group). He currently

has 45 students on his caseload and has taught for 9 years. Nathan identifies as a white man who was 41 years old at the time of the interviews. He developed his personal identity through leadership roles in the military and later transitioned into teaching. Currently, he demonstrates leadership in his teaching position as well and provides advice for early career teachers based on his own experiences in the military as well as teaching career.

Personal Identity

Nathan’s family consists of his wife and 13-year-old stepdaughter, whom he prioritizes above all else. At the beginning of Interview 2, Nathan shared that he was just returning from a trip to Disneyland for three days with his family, “We just got done with midwinter break. We went down to Disneyland for three days, the family, so it was nice to go somewhere else and get recharged... It was a really nice week.” Nathan’s relationship with his stepdaughter, which he refers to as his daughter, is an important part of his life, “I’ve basically known her since she was seven, eight, and she’s been phenomenal” (Nathan Interview 2).

Since Nathan helps coach the high school football team, many of his peer groups are connected to school. He engages in recreation activities outside of schools with his peers “So, we've had a couple of golfing outings, like the ... random teachers that I would've never thought of that golf, we all just go and golf somewhere, and, and we did it twice over the summer, a couple of us did that, and we're trying to organize, uh, some things” (Nathan Interview 2). While Nathan strives to keep his work separate from his personal life, he admits that there is a lot of crossover and it is hard for him to talk about his personal identity separate from his teaching identity. For example, he describes how his relationships with his students extend beyond graduation, “So when you get one of those kids across the line and then they end up emailing you back and saying, hey, this is what I'm doing. You know, I'm being successful. Thank you

for, for pushing me and believing in me…That's what makes it worthwhile. So, um, yeah, I guess that would be my, my teaching and my personal identity" (Nathan Interview 2).

Self-care

When asked how he overcomes challenges in his personal life, Nathan talked about how his family and friends rely on him to be the strong individual in challenging situations. He shares how he feels responsible for the well-being of those around him, "I have always been the rock that other people crashed on to. Um, so when you're that rock, you don't have anybody else to crash on to" (Nathan Interview 3). While he says he can vent to his wife, he prefers to engage in self-care which includes playing video games or building models, demonstrating a need for alone time to recharge and reenergize:

> I disconnect from work with them in the evening. Either I'm playing video games or painting goofy little models, or I'm doing something that is completely not involved in what the real-world tasks and whatever that point in time is real world has nothing for me that I want to hang out with right now (Nathan Interview 3).

Nathan described how relaxing it is for him to paint the miniature models, "And they looked like gray plastic, and then you take a bunch of different colors of paint and go at it. See what you can do" (Nathan Interview 3). When asked if it takes a lot of attention to detail, he replied, "Yeah. It's a lot of patience. And you can get angry with them. Like, so if you mess up and you totally swap paint in the wrong spot, you can be like, 'Son of a.'" (Nathan Interview 3). Nathan explained how his emotions while painting relate to his feelings at school:

> "Well, you can never do it [be mad at] to kids. You could be so upset with a group of kids that aren't following along. And you got to say, okay, now come on. You know, this is

how we're going to do this. I'll walk you through it. And over here, I can finally let some of that aggression out and be like, why did I paint that color ahr!" (Nathan Interview 3).

Although he speaks positively of his teaching experience, he also indirectly shares frustrations with his job. For example, he mentioned that he can "be mad at" the figurines unlike his students, which may show how he deals with the tensions that come from working with adolescents with (dis)abilities. From this example, it is possible that he is indirectly sharing that he does experience frustration with direct teacher-student interactions but chooses to remain positive when helping students. He works hard to guide his students, refraining from responding emotionally.

Teaching in the Family

It was Nathan's sister who encouraged him many times to become a special education teacher, "She's like, you just need to do this online program and get your master's and then you're in. I was like, oh, okay…I got my foot in the door and then I can figure out what I want to do from there" (Nathan Interview 3). As he pursued teaching, his sister remained his greatest support system, "My sister was a special ed teacher before me…Um, and she kind of helped pushed me through to getting my master's degree" (Nathan Interview 3). His sister did not remain as a special education classroom teacher, but instead, moved to instructing in an online program. According to Nathan, she got too attached to her students, "She faced a lot of ACEs, a lot of situations where kids were in a bad way and they just had no idea that they were even in a bad way" (Nathan Interview 3). Nathan's sister, like him, is also a coach.

Pathway to Becoming a Teacher

Nathan took several detours before settling into his current teaching and coaching roles. After graduating high school, he was not sure what career he wanted to pursue and reflected on the lack of guidance from school counselors:

> There was never a time that I can remember where I went to a counselor and they said, 'what do you want to do with your life when you get done with high school?' What's your goal? I just don't remember it (Nathan Interview 3).

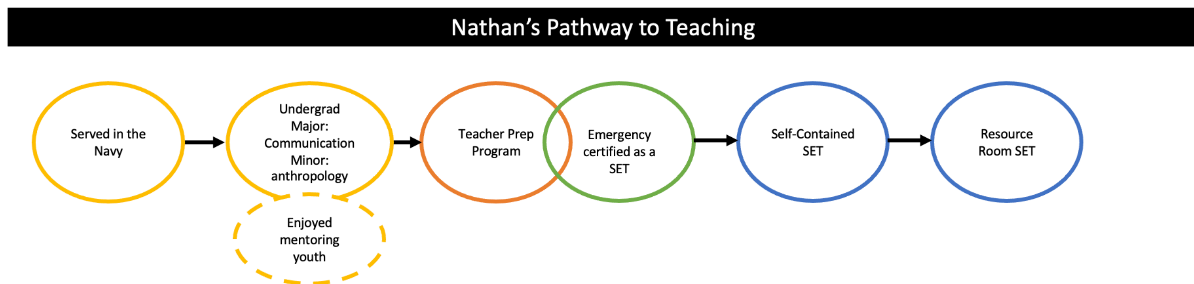
Ultimately, Nathan decided to join the Navy right after high school. After completing his service with the Navy, he went back to school to get his undergraduate degree in communication with a minor in anthropology. After graduation, as he reflected on potential careers, he realized that throughout his time in the Navy and school, he had enjoyed opportunities to mentor:

> And when I finally reflect a little bit, what I said to myself was, you know, when I was in the Navy, I was mentoring 18- to 19-year-old kids. When I was at the [local urban university name], I was mentoring 18 to 21, 22-year-old kids. Why don't I do some sort of mentorship? And for me that meant teaching (Nathan Interview 3).

Upon this realization, he began looking into a career in teaching (see Figure 11).

Figure 11

Nathan's Pathway to Becoming a Special Education Teacher



Nathan explained that he received an emergency certification to teach and was teaching special education simultaneously while getting his certification, "Um, so I was teaching without

my teaching cert with the idea that I would get my teaching cert" (Nathan Interview 1). Nathan hit a roadblock when his emergency certification expired before he finished his masters' program and he started questioning his path, "My certificate ran out before I had finished my master's, and that was when I, uh, kind of started questioning like, 'What am I doing'" (Nathan Interview 1). Nathan knew that he was great at building rapport with students, but he struggled with the other parts of the job such as paperwork, "I knew I was good at connecting with kids, but I wasn't good at all the other things that I needed to be good at" (Nathan Interview 1). However, Nathan did not give up but continued pursuing his goal of becoming a special education teacher.

The next series of hardships for Nathan, were finding a teaching job. He was applying for teaching jobs without any success, "which was very soul sucking, and you've got to kind of search for, like, is this something you really wanna do, because you're getting some answers that you don't like" (Nathan Interview 1). Rather than give up, Nathan turned inward and followed his motto of looking at his actions before blaming others. He then went to principals he had worked for in the past as a student teacher and asked for feedback in an ultimate act of vulnerability:

> "Um, and that was when I started reflecting about myself and I remember I went to every principal that I'd worked for and said, 'I need you to be blatantly honest. What are things I need to improve on to be hired? Because something I'm doing is wrong.' And that's a big... That's difficult for a lot of people, because you've got to look at yourself and say, 'Okay, what am I not doing or doing that's messing this up?'" (Nathan Interview 1).

During this process, one of his previous principal's gave him the break he needed:

> Um, and a lot of the teachers were honest with me. Um, my principal here said, 'Look, I'm looking for kid magnets and I'll teach him how to teach.' Uh, and he said, 'You're a kid magnet,' so they ended up hiring me back here (Nathan Interview 1)

Nathan drew from these challenging experiences in order to become the best he could be, "And since, since then, um, my drive has been to be the best teacher I can be, and that- sometimes you fall short just like everybody, but you figure out, like, 'All right. How can I improve?'" (Nathan Interview 1). This philosophy of self-reflection aided Nathan in building his teaching career.

Special Education Teaching Identity

Mentorship has always been an important part of both Nathans personal and teaching identity, throughout both his time in the Navy and during college, "I think the overarching goal has always been the same. I think it was to help kids or to mentor kids" (Nathan Interview 1). When Nathan first became a teacher, he was overly confident, "I would say when I first started the job, I was very full of myself. Uh, I thought that I was really, really good at it, and, um, if things didn't go my way, it was everybody else's fault, which is exactly what I teach the kids not to do now" (Nathan Interview 1). Nathan's ability to grow from being overly confident in his teaching ability to recognizing he had much to learn demonstrates his ability to engage in self-reflection.

He attributes his growth in reflexive practices to reading books and striving to learn from his mistakes, "Um, a couple of different books I've read have kind of led me to believe that, if you take everything as your fault, you have the power to change it, uh, as opposed to blaming everybody else for your problems, because then it's just gonna continue to be a problem" (Nathan Interview 1). When asked about the book, he explained that it was written by Navy Seals and that the key takeaway were:

> They had a mission where they did an excellent job, and when they finished the mission, they immediately went to debrief and picked all the things out that was wrong, because there's always things you can improve on. So, that's kind of where we came up with my quote and kind of what I try and live (Nathan Interview 1).

Nathan strives to learn from all of his mistakes as well as successes with students.

In order to focus on what he is doing well; Nathan posts notes from his students on the back of his classroom so that he can see it whenever he is teaching from the front of his classroom. He explained:

> So, that back wall, kind of to the left - I call that my ‘I love me’ wall. Uh, which is an old Navy thing. There was a joke about, you know, every trophy or thing you get for whatever, you put in a room, that's your ‘I love me’ room (Nathan Interview 2).

During challenging times, Nathan’s wall of student notes builds his teaching self-efficacy:

> This is something I can look on and say, ‘Oh, these are the good things I've done.’ All those are either from kids or admin saying, ‘Hey, this is how you've helped me,’ or, ‘This is what you've done to help me out. Thanks for being there’ (Nathan Interview 2).

Keeping in touch with previous students who have graduated is another important part of Nathan’s teaching identity. Nathan recently attended the wedding of a previous student, “So, there was an opportunity to actually get, to see kids, not in high school and say like, oh, …how good a group of kids that are, uh, recharges your battery” (Nathan Interview 2). Connecting with students after they leave his classroom and seeing them be successful supports Nathan’s self-efficacy.

Student Outcomes and Performance

Student outcomes are one of the driving factors for Nathan. On his classroom wall, Nathan keeps a quote, “I will be relentless in my pursuit of perfection” and this drives his daily motivation (Nathan Interview 1). Nathan acknowledges that while one cannot achieve perfection, it is important to maximize effort. His classroom environment rewards students for effort rather than outcomes. At the back of the classroom, he keeps an effort scale for his students. Nathan explained, “You'll never be perfect. It's how hard do you drive to get there is what's gonna measure you” (Nathan Interview 1). He went on to explain how he motivates students to overcome moments where they lack motivation, “Um, so there will definitely be times…you're like, ‘I don't wanna do anything,’ and I'll see that and be like, ‘Okay, I gotta do something. I gotta get busy’” (Nathan Interview 1). He describes how he measures student outcomes in effort, not necessarily test scores or other performance metrics:

> So you're really talking about the whole kid as opposed to just, you know, the disability. What I really try and strive for in my classes are how hard do you work? And what I've noticed is - is work ethic is not indicative of disability. It's not indicative of a stature. It's not indicative of income. It's strictly you and who you are and how hard are you going to work? To get these certain things done. And some kids work really, really hard and get it. Other kids don't have to work hard because they just naturally get it. My kids, my kids tend to have to work harder” (Nathan Interview 3).

Nathan struggles with the task of teaching kids that working hard is important even if the outcome does not necessarily match that of their peers, “So how do I instill in them that it's okay to work hard and not be right as long as you're continuing to work hard?” (Nathan Interview 3).

As a high school teacher, Nathan feels this pressure because his classroom is one of the final public education opportunities many individuals with (dis)abilities will encounter.

It is very important for Nathan to have all of his students graduate to optimize opportunities in their adult lives and he struggles with the discourses surrounding graduation requirements. Some teachers believe that students should not be allowed to graduate unless their grades are high, even if they have displayed a strong work ethic. Nathan pushes back on this narrative, “I think admin says we want everybody to graduate and teachers say these kids aren't doing the amount of work so they don't deserve to graduate” (Nathan Interview 3). Nathan identifies what he perceives as the disconnect, “…Where the miscommunication comes is, what I think is, is what they're [admin] trying to say is how can you as teachers help these kids graduate without lowering your expectations” (Nathan Interview 3). Furthermore, Nathan provides questions that teachers should ask themselves, “So that would mean, are we calling them in for extra study sessions? Are we communicating home to parents? Are we communicating to kids? Like these are things you need to do” (Nathan Interview 3).

Work-life Balance

Creating a balance between his job and personal life is important to Nathan. His mentor teacher during his student teaching had strong boundaries regarding her work and told him:

> When you go home, be done with teaching, because if you don't, you will, you'll be working on lesson plans. You'll be looking up all these different things and you'll constantly be doing it at home, and you'll miss out on things you want to do at home. Like spend time with my daughter and hang out with my wife and things like that (Nathan Interview 3).

Nathan took this advice and applies it to his approach to work-life balance, leaving work at school and only involving his family in extracurricular school and community events like football games:

> I try and keep my personal life and my professional life, as separate as the, the mundane things, the things you don't want, like writing lesson plans or writing IEPs, I try and do that all at school. The fun stuff, like community involvement, basketball games, things of that nature, those things I do try and attempt that I try and take my family to them" (Nathan Interview 1).

In a high school setting, school events play an important role as far as building rapport with colleagues and he picks and chooses the events he attends. On one hand Nathan explains that he limits attendance to school events because he desires to spend time with his daughter, "I would say this, the just school ones… because I've, I've got my daughter…" (Nathan Interview 3). On the other hand, he does attend some events because he has a leadership role in the special education department, "If I say I'm going, that helps…it lets all the other teachers know, like, 'Hey, Nathan is going to this. This is, this might be something that's kinda cool. Like, maybe I should go'" (Nathan Interview 3). Nathan demonstrates a strong belief in working as a team for the greater good of the students, "So, the more relationships you can build with that…ultimately, you're gonna build a better product, which is more kids graduating, and, um, doing better on their scores, and getting into where they wanna get into" (Nathan Interview 2).

Proactive Conflict Resolution

Not only is teamwork important to Nathan, but he proactively minimizes conflict whenever possible. When Nathan is advocating for inclusion, he focuses on collaborating with the general education teacher to support student success, "But we did it together. It wasn't like,

'Hey, you gotta modify this.' We were like, 'Here's some ideas I got. What do you got? What can we put together?'" (Nathan Interview 2). Notice that in this example Nathan tries not to tell the teacher what they need to modify, rather, he invites him to work collaboratively. Nathan also described how he approaches more challenging situations, "The only time combative stuff happens, for lack of a better term, is, uh, usually, when somebody pops off without giving a ... when they give a raw reaction to something that's happening" (Nathan Interview 2). Nathan talked about two strategies for conflict resolution, with the first being to praise in public and correct in private, "With an adult, you wanna say...I love to praise in public and then talk in private" (Nathan Interview 3). His second technique is what he calls the "24-hour rule" where he waits 24 hours before responding to a conflict (Nathan Interview 3).

Nathan shared an example of an exchange with a teacher who made negative comments in a group email that upset the team on the thread. Nathan wrote, "'I appreciate your input' (laughs). That's all I said" and he then described the persons' response, "And they fired back, uh, 'If you really appreciated my input, you would X, Y, and Z'" (Nathan interview 2). While Nathan wanted to respond right away, he waited 24 hours before approaching the teacher to talk in private:

> And I was like, 'I could write this email, but I'm gonna wait.' And I went in and talked to her later…before I even said anything, she goes, 'I'm really sorry. I kinda threw you under the bus there,' and I said, 'Hey, that happens, but it's all right.' We got it worked out. We came up with an idea to help this kid out" (Nathan Interview 2)

In this circumstance, Nathan focused on the student rather than his own feelings, used his conflict management strategies, and as a result, they were able to put differences aside and help their student.

Commitment to the field

Early on in his career, Nathan reported feeling committed and never having days where he contemplated leaving. However, more recently, Nathan has experienced pressure from school building and district administrators leading him to think about leaving about 20 out of 180 school days a year. He explained how hard it is for all teachers, special and general education, to navigate changing district and system policies:

> I've probably thought about leaving more so this year than in years past… you build yourself a system in place and you say, okay, I know this system works. And when somebody comes in and questions your system, and then you need to completely change it because X, Y, and Z, it's very, it's very disheartening. Um, I feel like we are, and I mean, I feel like this, all teachers let alone just special ed teachers, we are constantly asked to do more with the amount of time we have (Nathan Interview 3).

He went on to talk about how many meetings he has to attend, which interferes with his time to actually prepare for teaching, "Let's say as a teacher, you had four hours of *meetings*. Then right after that four hours, you have four hours of *teaching* and now your day is shot. You never got to the things you want to talk about" (Nathan Interview 3). While this question came towards the end of the third interview it was the first time that he mentioned burnout, "So yeah, it's just interesting. Like it just teacher burnout is a real thing. Special ed burnout is a real thing!" (Nathan Interview 3). While he mentioned burnout, he did not talk about experiencing it himself and made it clear that he continues to remain committed to the field despite these challenges.

Advice for New Teachers

Nathan had three major points of advice for new teachers, (a) prepare to fail, (b) ask for help, and (c) keep focused on what is going well. Nathan emphasized that new teachers will have

unsuccessful moments, “I don't mean this in a bad way, you are going to fail. There is going to be a point where you are like, I have no idea what I'm doing. It, it happens to everybody” (Nathan Interview 3).

When in a teaching job, Nathan suggests that new teachers, ‘Don't be afraid to ask for help if you, if, if you are asking for help, doesn't mean, I think less of you, it means that there's something that you need help with.’” (Nathan Interview 3). He noted a disconnect between what teachers say to their own students and do themselves, “I find it very interesting that we tell our kids to ask us for help on how to do something and then we don't follow our same advice” (Nathan Interview 3).

Lastly, Nathan points out how easy it is to focus on failures rather than success:

> Focus on your successes and not on your failures…I still have three kids in particular that I can remember by name that I looked at and we go, those kids failed out of school. And, to be honest, I don't think there was anything I could have done, but that doesn't make me look bad. And it doesn't stop me from looking back and saying, could I have done something different?” (Nathan Interview 3).

What Nathan describes here is the tension between letting go when a student does not respond to interventions and accepting the responsibility of continued learning. He strives to learn from these situations to become better each year.

Teddy

Teddy has worked with students who have IDD for more than 10 years. He currently teaches in a self-contained elementary classroom for students with IDD, which is the same elementary school as another study participant, Yelena (the final case). Teddy identifies as a white man who was 33 years old at the time of the interviews. He started his career in a private

school setting, which he described as a school for individuals with EBD, "I feel like my, my first year was very unique in that it was basically a school with only, um, emotionally disturbed, um, or behavioral students. Um, so it was a very unique experience my first year" (Teddy Interview 3). He then taught at a residential program for another year before moving to a public elementary school. Teddy shared that he found this research process to be beneficial, because it gave him the opportunity to reflect on his own life, "I like doing exercises like this because I like to reflect on the stuff I've done. I think that, um, I've always been a pretty like, reflective, nostalgic person, and I think that that's actually one of the things that's actually guided me through" (Teddy Interview 3). This case study explores how Teddy's personal and teaching identities positively influence his commitment to the field.

Personal Identity

I identified three themes in Teddy's personal identity, including his (a) faith, (b) prioritization of self-care, and (c) previous experiences with family members who have IDD. The following section will explore how his personal identity influenced his teaching career.

Faith

Teddy did not bring up his faith until the end of the third interview. Teddy explained how his faith is foundational in his work, "I believe in that. Um, there is biblical, you know, reasons for doing this job. Mostly that the teachings of Jesus are, um, particular to people who are forgotten - are disabled or are in need of some sort of assistance" (Teddy Interview 3). Teddy described how his faith informed his career path:

> I think that that's a huge, huge part of like how I even got into the field to be honest with you. And it's not something that I consciously think about like when I'm at work necessarily, but it is, um, a big reason why I'm in the field (Teddy Interview 3).

Teddy attended Christian schools from Kindergarten through college, “Well I'm a Christian. I went to Christian schools from K through college” (Teddy Interview 3). He also attends church with his wife on a weekly basis, which is part of his faith and his family traditions.

Although Teddy attends church outside of his job, his beliefs connect him with other teachers in his district, providing a social outlet and additional support, “I know a couple of people in our district and they're also, Christians. And a few of them I've even met out, outside of the school environment and gone to church with them and stuff” (Teddy Interview 3). Teddy mentioned noticing how his Christian colleagues share his viewpoints on his career as a *calling*, “It's kind of interesting… people in the field kind of have a lot of the same viewpoints that I do. And why their job has a greater purpose…”(Teddy Interview 3).

Self-care

Teddy’s relationship with his wife and his faith are pivotal in his ability to cope with challenges in and outside of his job. When Teddy feels especially stressed, he also turns to exercise and other self-care strategies. He explained how he copes with challenges by avoiding confrontation and relying on self-care,

> My wife will tell you that I'm kinda non-confrontational in general. Which actually does spill over into my, into my job too. But, you know, I like making sure that things are going well. So I try to maybe avoid some of the challenges that I might have at times” (Teddy Interview 3).

Teddy recognizes that avoiding confrontation is not always healthy and shared how he has been working on addressing challenges more directly, “But like I feel like I'm getting better at actually attacking them [challenges] head on” (Teddy Interview 3). Teddy describes the importance of self-care in helping him work through challenges, “One thing I definitely – that I'm doing right

now is making sure I'm taking care of myself" (Teddy Interview 3). Self-care allows Teddy to manage stress and prioritize, "That way I'm able to not feel overwhelmed by challenges that pop up outside of the school environment... like, certainly prioritizing challenges" (Teddy Interview 3). Teddy's preferred self-care strategies include physical activities, like running and playing basketball, and reading.

Physical activities provide Teddy with a sense of calm, "For me it's going for a run. Usually it's some kind of physical activity. I like, I've always been a, a sports person. So, doing something where it's giving me some kind of cardio workout, for example is always, it's actually very calming for me" (Teddy Interview 3). In a text message from Teddy (see Figure 12), he explains that playing basketball is a "blessing" to him because it has helped him make friends, facilitated conversations, and created professional networking connections which have led to job opportunities.

Figure 12

A text message from Teddy sharing an artifact representing his personal identity

While sports provide physical exercise as well as opportunities for social relationships, Teddy also finds solace reading books, "Also reading books is something else that I use to, kinda set aside my night to kind of have some time to do that, like and relax and just focus on that" (Teddy

Interview 3). Taking care of himself physically and emotionally helps Teddy manage personal and job-related stressors.

Previous Experience with Individuals Who Have a (Dis)ability

Teddy had two important experiences with individuals who had (dis)abilities prior to becoming a teacher including: (1) having individuals who were deaf attend his classes in middle school, and (2) having a cousin and uncle with autism. Teddy shared that in middle school, there were guest students who came to classrooms from a school for individuals hard of hearing as an inclusive learning opportunity, "I think they were from an actual deaf school. But they did some actual inclusion opportunities at our school" (Teddy Interview 3). This experience informed his desire to work with individuals with disabilities. Teddy also has direct experiences with individuals with disabilities in his family, "I do have an uncle and cousin who have autism…and you know, our families are pretty close too" (Teddy Interview 3). Teddy is close with his family and thinks that his relationship with them subconsciously influences his teaching:

> "I don't go into the school day thinking about them necessarily (laughs) it's kind of more maybe subconscious than anything. It reminds, it kind of brings up like when I'm interacting with a student sometimes I'll, experience or observe something that they do and I'm like, 'Oh yeah, my uncle and my cousin do that.'" (Teddy Interview 3).

These personal experiences and relationships with individuals with IDD have shaped how Teddy thinks about his role, "So it's just been something that to me feels natural…it kind of sounds corny, but it's something that I understand right away because of my own personal experience" (Teddy Interview 1). While Teddy did not want to become a special educator at the onset of his career, these life experiences pushed his transition into the role.

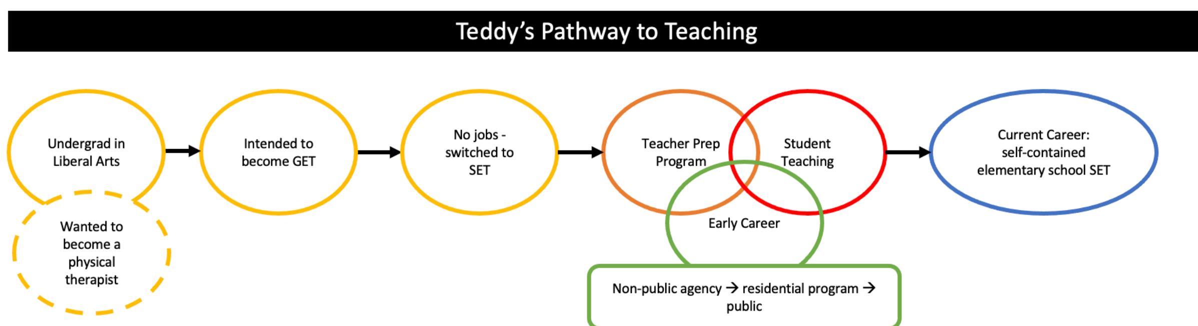
Pathway to Becoming a Teacher

Prior to becoming a teacher, Teddy wanted to become a physical therapist, both of which focus on helping individuals in some way, "So I would say in general it's kind of a little bit of a crossover of the- the desire to help people, no matter what their, like disability or what their capability is" (Teddy Interview 3). Teddy made the switch from physical therapy to education during (see Figure 13) his sophomore year of college,

> And kind of a funny long story but, like I failed a class my sophomore year in college. I should say I didn't fail it. But I didn't, I didn't master the prerequisite to move on in the program. And that was to be a physical therapist. And since I didn't pass the prerequisite class, I decided to go into education. And, first I wanted to be a P.E. teacher. And then kind of during the summer, going into my junior year of college I was, I wanted to switch over to completely to gen-ed, being a gen-ed teacher" (Teddy Interview 3).

Figure 13

Teddy's Pathway to Becoming a Special Education Teacher



While Teddy originally wanted to teach in general education settings (see Figure 13), he graduated during the recession, which limited his job opportunities, "And you know, they were, they were laying off teachers at that time. They were pink slipping teachers. And, it was very stressful for me…because like pretty much any job was not really having a huge hiring boom at

the time" (Teddy Interview 3). As a result, Teddy began substitute teaching, "And then for a year I basically did odds and ends like teaching stuff. I did after school tutoring, I did subbing, anything to fill that role before eventually landing my position as a special ed teacher" (Teddy Interview 3). Despite the economic recession, Teddy was relentless in his pursuit of a teaching career.

As Teddy worked to become a teacher, he received support from his father who was an educator for 39 years, "My dad is, my dad's an educator himself actually. And has been for 39 years" (Teddy Interview 3). He acknowledges that his father's expertise and support is helpful in his own career, "So, you know, kind of relying on that expertise has always been super helpful, not to mention he's my dad, he's going to support me" (Teddy Interview 3). Not only did his father provide support during Teddy's pathway to teaching, but his sister and friends rallied around him, "I had, I had my friends, around from college who kinda knew my passions. And they were very encouraging to me, in pursuing what I wanted to pursue. My sister was very supportive" (Teddy Interview 3). Teddy is surrounded by supportive friends and family.

Special Education Teaching Identity

When asked about his teaching identity, Teddy reflects a belief that he has characteristic traits that lend themselves to being a good teacher. He explains how he believes patience and empathy are qualities required for the job, "I've always been a pretty patient person and an empathetic person… I feel that, my attributes, reflect really well in this particular field" (Teddy Interview 1). He described his continued commitment to special education belief that he was raised for teaching, "I don't know if I, if I would ever leave, for anything else … cause of who I am and how I was raised" (Teddy Interview 1). Similar to his personal life, Teddy's receives

ample support from his professional team in his work life. Continuing education and creating a balance between his work and personal life are also important aspects of his teaching identity.

Support from The Team

Teddy relies on direct support from other special education teachers and paraprofessionals, as well as positive affirmations from students and administrators. Teddy describes support from his team of teachers and paraprofessionals as the most important factor influencing his commitment to the field. When asked why he remained in teaching despite challenges he replied, “I had a super supportive group around me that is still at that school. I had two, they weren't co-teachers. But they were also teachers that I worked alongside…they were fantastic. They were really supportive” (Teddy Interview 2). He went on to describe his relationship with paraprofessionals:

> And I had really good paras too. So I kind of joke about it now. But I was like very spoiled having that kind of support group around me because they were just so helpful and, um, they listened to something if I had a problem. They helped me if there was an issue with this one particular student, you know, that was really violent. They knew to like, they knew some interventions to help me with, and everything” (Teddy Interview 3).

Teddy received both emotional support and instructional support from the team of educators and paraprofessionals.

Positive affirmations have helped provide Teddy motivation throughout his career. Even small notes mean a lot to him, “I’m like a words of affirmation person. So, any time that you get like, a little note from somebody, you know, especially from students or what not, I'm like, ‘oh that's really cool.’ It really means a lot to me.” (Teddy Interview 2). When asked to share an artifact that represents his teaching identity, Teddy sent a picture of a poster that hangs in his

classroom made by students and paraprofessionals for his birthday. One of the notes is written in braille from a student with a vision impairment. Teddy also described letters or personal conversations that have motivated him, “I've had multiple parents, come up to me or write letters for me, over the years that they basically said, ‘We really appreciate how much you care for my child’” (Teddy Interview 1). Support from his team, students, and parents are what motivate Teddy.

Continuing Education.

When Teddy faces challenges in his job, he looks to the outward support of special education teachers and paraprofessionals, while also turning to self-improvement. For example, Teddy discussed a previous student with severe challenging behavior and how instead of quitting, he decided to learn more. This included pursuing his English Language Learners (ELL) certificate, “I decided that I wanted to get my ELL certificate to kind of better myself because that student in particular. He was an ELL student” (Teddy Interview 2). Teddy explained how he reflects inwardly when facing challenges, “So, like if something doesn't go right I certainly try to, better myself. And I think that's what spurred the whole, getting the ELL cert and then getting my masters and then now pursing national boards” (Teddy Interview 2). Teddy made a choice that to stay in the profession, he needed to continue to improve his instructional skills for students with disabilities:

> So like, cause something happened [student problem behavior and I didn't know what was going on or how to respond to it. And I feel like, you know, the next year kind of allowed me to re-evaluate like is this something that you really, that I really want to do? And if I did wanna keep doing it, I need to get better at it because, because I need to do

> come up with interventions that are more helpful to work with specific students" (Teddy Interview 2).

Instead of blaming the student, Teddy recognized that the student was struggling to understand English and needed more support, "And I believed that primarily one of the reasons that he was not able to cope well or to manage his own behavior was because, um, there were some, there was definitely a language barrier" (Teddy Interview 2). Teddy continued to educate himself on strategies for working with kids who have (dis)abilities, which both improved his teaching skills and helped provide protective factors to prevent burnout.

Work-life Balance

Despite juggling continuing education responsibilities and his job, Teddy has strong boundaries in place between his professional and personal life, "I like having my space to go home and not really be too concerned with work stuff" (Teddy Interview 3). Sometimes Teddy will work at home, but he sets a timer and stops once the timer goes off:

> I go home, and I have a timer on my phone and I just have the minutes count down of how much work I will actually do. And when the timer goes off, I have to stop to try and bring some sort of separation from work and my personal life (Teddy Interview 3).

Since Teddy's work email is on his phone, he does respond to emails if necessary, "I do have my email, my school email is connected to my phone. So, I am able to read my emails if I need to and I respond to them if I absolutely need to" (Teddy Interview 3). However, most of the time, Teddy refrains from responding to work texts, emails, and calls when he is at home:

> When it comes to, uh, the end of the school day…parents are more than welcome to text or to email me or try to call me. But I typically do not answer because I, I try to really, compartmentalize, my personal life and my professional life.

Teddy's work life balance has developed over time:

> I would say that actually that's one way that I've really grown over the years because before, beginning of the, beginning of my teaching career, I definitely was very much into like if I had to call a parent when I got home I would do it. Now I do not do that" (Teddy interview 3).

Teddy suggests that his initial drive to always respond may have come from having a hero complex, "I feel like because of that quote, unquote, hero complex, I was gonna answer all those emails and those text messages" (Teddy Interview 1). Teddy moved away from having a hero complex as he matured in his role as a special education teacher. He described this shift in mindset, moving from saving kids to walking alongside students on a given path, "And then letting them kind of go from there and getting families on the right path …something that like gets them going in the right direction, as opposed to being this all-out savior" (Teddy Interview 1). Teddy went on to explain how he wants his students to independent, "What you want students to do is you want them to be independent in how they function in the world and you don't wanna be someone that's just kind of constantly holding their hand" (Teddy Interview 1). Teddy expresses why giving up a hero complex created more balance in his life, "And for me that's a huge difference because it's allowed me to step back, and have more peace of mind as a teacher" (Teddy Interview 1). Letting go of a hero complex while creating boundaries between his personal and professional life may serve as contributing factors to his commitment to the field.

Commitment to the Field

While becoming a teacher, friends and family supported Teddy and encouraged him to continue pursuing his passion. Now, as a special educator, he gets support from two of his special education teacher colleagues who teach in the same building. One of these colleagues is

another study participant, Yelena, whose case study will be discussed in the next section. He shares both joys and challenges of the job with colleagues, “I, one thing they do is they- they listen if I have to vent about something. And they know that I'm, in the same way, like if they need to vent about something like I'm- I'm there to listen to them” (Teddy Interview 3). He explained how sharing similar experiences strengthens their bonds, “It's one of those things where you just kind of have a shared experience with somebody, they understand what it is that- that you're having, that you're feeling great about or you're feeling challenged by” (Teddy Interview 3). He went on to explain how he turns to them when he is wavering in his commitment, “And they are like the- the first two that I would go to when talking about like, you know, keeping that passion for education and working with special needs students…” (Teddy Interview 3).

When asked about days where he felt so challenged that he might want to quit the field of special education, he confidently replied there were zero days, “Zero. Yeah…Uh, first year teaching was still zero” (Teddy Interview 3). Even when being frustrated by a student with extremely challenging behavior, as discussed earlier, Teddy sought more education and training rather than leave the field. When asked what contributes to his current high level of commitment to the field, he explained how gaining experience has built his teaching self-efficacy.

> I feel that I have a level of expertise now, that maybe I didn't have in years past. Like any time, like for any job, where you're, where you're sticking to it and you're- you're staying with it for more than a couple of years, you're gonna pick up things that allow you to grow in a way that you know, you feel that you are an expert on that job. And it feels good to- to know that about yourself” (Teddy Interview 3).

Advice for New Teachers

Teddy shared advice for new teachers during the interviews. First, he advises that new teachers understand the importance of the job, while expecting challenges along the way. Teddy demonstrated his own reverence for the job in his advice:

> I would say that you're about to enter a profession, that I at least view this way, I think it's one of the most important careers that you can do in the world. I enjoy coming to work and knowing that I'm making a difference for someone who may, sometimes be ignored by society" (Teddy Interview 3).

Teddy's faith-based motivation for following what he perceives as a *calling to teach* may provide motivation for overcoming challenges that arise, "You're going to be challenged by that [the job] a little bit. You're going to see some things that maybe don't sit well with you but it's okay to be, it's okay to- to feel that- that angst or that worry that sometimes comes with it" (Teddy Interview 3). Teddy demonstrates positive thinking as he shared, "I like that challenge… because ultimately you are making a difference every single day" (Teddy Interview 3). Overall, Teddy wants to ensure that teachers know that the job may present some challenges, but the reward of helping children with (dis)abilities outweighs any hurdles, "I would say stick with it. Because, you're gonna get your butt kicked at times doing this job. But benefits of it outweigh the disadvantages" (Teddy Interview 3).

The ability to reflect on past experiences is reflected in Teddy's evaluation of the interview process, "I think that this process of like talking to you on the phone, you asking me these questions, it's like a reminder for me… 'Oh, this has been worth it because of this and because of this'" (Teddy Interview 3). His last words reflect his ability to take his own advice and remember his overall goal is worth the struggles he has faced.

Yelena

Yelena teachers in a self-contained classroom with students who have IDD and are in Kindergarten through second grade. At the time of the study, she had been teaching in this classroom for eight years. Yelena recognizes that her students are multiply marginalized and described her students as follows:

> There is a lot of intersectionality with my students! The least-impacted student I have is my one white kid, and she's from a two moms + dad and stepmom family so is likely to experience marginalization due to having parents who are LGBTQ+. I have four students who are Black; four who are Latinx and first-generation American. Seven of my nine qualify for free/reduced lunch, one of whom is living in a family shelter and is served by the McKinney-Vento act. Thankfully, the other eight students have had very stable housing and (as far as I am aware) family structures (Yelena Screener).

Yelena demonstrates awareness of the complex intersectionality of her students' identities and is a strong advocate for her students' needs. Yelena identifies as a Mixed-race woman who was 30 years old at the time of the interview. Her personal identity includes being an avid reader and a strong commitment to mental health. She has had many experiences with individuals who have (dis)abilities, which have influenced her decision to become a teacher. As a special education teacher, Yelena focuses on providing assistive technology to her students while navigating sometimes challenging relationships with parents.

Personal Identity

Yelena's passion for reading is an integral part of her personal identity and she used books to talk about important aspects of her identity (see Table 5). The first three books shared by Yelena outline the progression of her childhood until her college years. The fourth book

serves as an example of Yelena's focus on maintaining her mental health. Yelena shared her experiences grappling with secondary trauma and the influence on her personal and teaching identities.

Table 5

Yelena's Books Representing Personal Identity Artifact from Interview 3

Book Title & Author	Life Stage	Evidence
Matilda, Roald Dahl	Childhood	"So Matilda was my first like favorite favorite [emphasized the second word *favorite*] book. Um, it's about a kid who is a very early reader and uh, has shitty parents…one of her teachers like saves her, right? So I think that I like related to that a lot" "I have it tattooed on my foot…Yeah. One of the pictures from it. Um, also I just loved Roald Dahl stories [author's name"
Harry Potter and The Half-Blood Prince, J.K. Rowling	Adolescence	"Um, yeah, so the Harry Potter books started coming out like as I was the same age as the characters, pretty much, and so I feel like it was just a very, very integral part of growing up for me" "Um, and this book in particular is the British version of the book because it was released while my girl scout troop was in London…Um, and my girl scout troop was like a huge part of my life growing up, and still like two of the girls from the five of us that were together all through high school, um, work in our district. So we still hang out and like see each other and stuff like that. So that's part of it."
The Power of One, Bryce Courtenay	Early adult and career	"Um, but it is both just like a good book and it reminds me of like my friends from college and that trip." "And, um, at one point when I was student teaching, we were trying to find age-appropriate books, or it was an 18- to 21-year-old class of kids, with like young adults with, uh, very significant multiple disabilities, like sensory impairments, very much health impacted. Um, and they had a read aloud every day and trying to be like, what kinds of books might be fun? And I was like, 'well, here's a book that I really liked.' So I brought it in and I started reading it."
Dialectical Behavior Therapy: A Clinician's Guide for Treating Disorders of Overcontrol, Thomas R. Lynch, PhD	Current life stage	"It's been really interesting in terms of self-discovery. Um, because I didn't realize, which I know that this sounds dumb, but I didn't realize that, other people didn't think the same way that I did" "I remember going to a lesson on things that over-controlled people say, and what they actually mean…like, 'Oh yeah, I'll try to do that.' And what we mean is, 'Absolutely not gonna happen.' I didn't realize that other people just meant that they would try to do it… I didn't really understand that some people can just do a thing and be like, 'Yeah, that was good enough'"

A Strong Reader

Yelena has identified as a reader since childhood, "I was like an obsessive reader. And I read very early, and I read a lot." (Yelena Interview 3). In response to the personal identity artifact prompt, Yelena brought a stack of books to describe who she was, summarized in Table 5. Yelena described how each book had impacted her personal identity at various stages of her life. Overall, the books she read through her life, provide snapshots as to her personal identity development over time.

First, Yelena described the story of *Matilda*, by Roald Dahl, which she noted was her favorite childhood book, “So Matilda was my first like favorite favorite [emphasized the second word *favorite*] book. Um, it’s about a kid who is a very early reader and uh, has shitty parents…one of her teachers like saves her, right? So I think that I like related to that a lot” (Yelena Interview 3). She then went on to explain how she tattooed a symbol for the book on her foot, “I have it tattooed on my foot…Yeah. One of the pictures from it. Um, also I just loved Roald Dahl stories [the author’s name” (Yelena Interview 3). Second, during adolescence, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, by J.K. Rowling, represented her adolescence as she related to storylines and characters, “Um, yeah, so the Harry Potter books started coming out like as I was the same age as the characters, pretty much, and so I feel like it was just a very, very integral part of growing up for me” (Yelena Interview 3). She especially treasured the British versions as they remind her of her visit to Great Britain with her Girl Scout troop, from which she still has friends today:

> Um, and this book in particular is the British version of the book because it was released while my girl scout troop was in London…Um, and my girl scout troop was like a huge part of my life growing up, and still like two of the girls from the five of us that were together all through high school, um, work in our district. So we still hang out and like see each other and stuff like that. So that's part of it (Yelena Interview 3).

Third, Yelena described how she was given *The Power of One*, by Bryce Courtenay in college. While it is set in South Africa, it reminded her of her travels with college friends to Ghana, “Um, but it is both just like a good book and it reminds me of like my friends from college and that trip” (Yelena Interview 3). The first three books shared by Yelena, demonstrated

her personal development from childhood to adolescence including travels and the development of long-lasting friendships.

Mental Health

The last book that Yelena shared touched on her personal struggles with mental health. After receiving counseling services, she purchased The Skills Training Manual for Radically open *Dialectical Behavior Therapy: A Clinician's Guide for Treating Disorders of Overcontrol,* by Thomas R. Lynch, PhD. Yelena advocates for being open about mental health struggles, "It's been really interesting in terms of self-discovery. Because I didn't realize, which I know that this sounds dumb, but I didn't realize that other people didn't think the same way that I did" (Yelena Interview 3). While Yelena explained how she continues working on her own mental health, she brought up the question about mental health for teachers in general. She mentions a fifth book, which she had not finished reading, focused on secondary trauma for teachers. She explained, "It's basically a book about secondary trauma. Because I think that is a very real part of teaching" (Interview 3). Yelena brought up the question of whether or not people who have struggled with mental health are drawn to what she identifies as *helping fields*, which includes the teaching field, "And I also sometimes wonder, like, how much of it [mental health issues] is causative, and how much of it is not" (Yelena Interview 3). Yelena then explained how she personally struggles with secondary trauma, using strong words such as "paralyzing" and "demoralizing" to explain her feelings:

> When we're exposed to kids who are in domestic violence, or who are in poverty, who are in families with addiction, and all of these things, and, like, we can't fix that, that is paralyzing, and it's totally demoralizing, and it's shitty. Like, it sucks to be, to feel like you can't help the kids that you wanna help (Yelena Interview 3).

Yelena expressed a belief that this phenomenon is not reserved for the teaching field and described the experiences of a friend who serves as a rape and sexual abuse counselor. This friend listens to traumatic stories day in and out, and Yelena talked about her struggles:

> She was one of the people that was helping provide counseling to the victims of the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting. And, like, she led group counseling sessions about people who are, like, witnesses of homicide, and things like that. And, hearing other people's stories is clearly not the same as living those stories. But when you hear it all day, every day, it adds up (Yelena Interview 3).

Yelena actively reflects on her personal identity and shared that she had been having similar conversations with her counselor before the interview, “I have a really hard time claiming an identity at all, which is, funnily enough, what I had been talking about in therapy the week before you asked me to bring a personal identity object” (Yelena Interview 3). While Yelena actively engages in strengthening her mental health, she admits that she is still grappling with her personal identity.

Previous Experience with Individuals Who Have a (Dis)abilities

Throughout her childhood, Yelena had friendships with individuals with (dis)abilities and also engaged in volunteering with individuals IDD. She leaned to sign from a family friend who was deaf as a child, “So I, we had a family friend when I was really little, whose daughter was deaf…Um, but that's where I started signing” (Yelena Interview 3). Throughout school, she engaged in inclusive programs where she was a “buddy” with individuals who had (dis)abilities, “We did a lot of Buddy classroom kind of stuff… when I was in fourth grade, I got to hang out with a kid who was 14. He was deaf-blind, and he had just come to the United States” (Yelena Interview 3). In fifth grade, she continued with the buddy program, “We would just like go to

music or PE with them and like hang out on the playground" (Yelena Interview 3). She explained how the school engaged in inclusive practices which would later shape her own views on inclusion:

> So I definitely saw those kids as existing and like they existed in a greater concentration than is typical. There were kids from that program that were on Student Council and like you know, participated in school stuff. So that was definitely impactful (Yelena Interview 3).

This buddy class experience was one of the influencing factors in her later decisions to become a volunteer, "I think it was the summer after eighth grade I volunteered at [school name] over the summer" (Yelena Interview 3). Another contributing factor was a family friend who came down with a condition resulting in paralysis. Yelena started by attending the camp with her friend:

> A family friend who, got Transverse myelitis…she went home from a soccer game one day and was like my legs feel kind of funny. She woke up the next day and was paralyzed upper leg and mid-chest" (Yelena Interview 3).

She reflects that this experience and witnessing the struggles of the girls' family, may have informed her current work with families, "And her family like tried to figure out how do we help our kid exist now as a disabled kid" (Yelena Interview 3). These experiences led to what would become a long-term annual volunteer experience at a camp for children with (dis)abilities.

Once she turned 16, she volunteered every summer through her junior year of college as a counselor at a camp for individuals with IDD. She described enjoying working with children who needed extra help and became friends with one of her mentees:

> I was drawn to the more complicated kids. One of my best friends is a kid who was my camper when I was 16 and she was nine. I think that is where I saw a lot of kids with a lot

> of different types of disabilities. I saw kids with like very complicated bodies who are otherwise very typical (Yelena Interview 3)

Through her time at camp, she learned to see kids with (dis)abilities as children who like typically developing children have various behaviors that make them fun to work with sometimes while challenging in other situations, “I don't care that you have a disability. You still don't get to be a punk. (laughs)… you're not special because you have a disability. Like yes, you're special and I will accommodate your needs” (Yelena Interview 3). Yelena’s words may read harsh on the page; however, they were spoken with kindness and warmth as she explained how she sees each child as their full self.

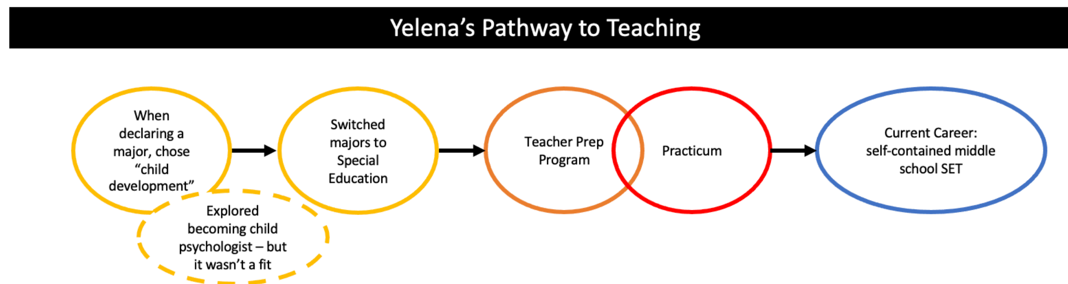
Pathway to Becoming at Teacher

Yelena had extensive volunteer experience with individuals who had IDD almost her entire life leading up to becoming a teacher. She knew she wanted to work with children with disabilities, but she originally chose nursing school. After being placed on the waitlist at her preferred school she decided to attend a special education program instead, “I ended up really wanting to go to nursing school. I was first on the waitlist…” (Yelena Interview 3). Yelena wanted to work with kids who have (dis)abilities in some capacity but was actually hesitant to becoming a teacher, “I was actually kind of afraid of being a teacher because one of my best friends in high school his mom is a special ed teacher in [large urban city name]. And he was like you don't wanna do it my mom works real hard. (laughs) Well, here I am” (Yelena Interview 3), she said shrugging. Despite hesitating to become a teacher, Yelena explained how her experiences as a nanny and babysitter and her own success in school contributed to her decision, “I babysat a lot growing up. I knew that like taking care of kids - it was a thing I could do - it felt like a normal thing for me …and school being a like successful experience for me” (Yelena

Interview 3). After getting into a university program on the East Coast, Yelena decided to major in early childhood development. Her pathway to teaching is depicted in Figure 14.

Figure 14

Yelena's Pathway to Becoming a Special Education Teacher



Yelena's major afforded her the flexibility she needed to decide if she wanted to pursue teaching. During the first semester, she was able to learn more about special education to decide if it was a good fit for her:

> Because I thought that was like kind of broad and like wouldn't make me be a teacher if I decided I didn't want to. But I also signed up for some of the first semester special ed classes just in case. And I think I got like six weeks into the first-semester and I was like, oh, yeah no I don't wanna be a child psychiatrist or psychologist that's not at all what I want (Yelena Interview 3).

Once Yelena decided she did not want to be a child psychiatrist or psychologist, she embraced special education:

> I would much rather do disability stuff. Um, so I switched majors and one of the things that's really, really, really good about [university name] is that it puts special ed majors in practicum positions from the first semester. So like it is not a surprise when you're a junior and you're suddenly three years in and like, oh, I don't actually like these classes (Yelena Interview 3).

Yelena's program allowed her to learn about teaching while simultaneously engaging in practicum experiences where she could apply knowledge:

> It's so helpful …So we're learning about teaching-reading we're also in a reading practicum. We're learning about teaching math, we are in a math practicum. Like we're learning about big classroom management we then go to a classroom and implement behavior plans. Like it is all very closely tied to actual experience, which is so much better than not doing it that way. So, I knew that I wanted to do severe disabilities (Yelena Interview 3).

As Yelena balanced school and student teaching experiences, she got support from her cohort as well as one of her undergrad advisors, "Well, just that my undergrad adviser probably was the one like kept me in line the best" she said smiling (Yelena Interview 3). After finishing her program, she moved back to the Pacific Northwest and became a special education teacher in a self-contained setting.

Special Education Teaching Identity

When asked about her teaching identity, Yelena expressed her desire to only be identified as a *special education* teacher:

> I don't know that I identify as a teacher as much as I am a special ed teacher. I don't feel like I have a lot in common with many gen ed teacher people. I don't understand their world or their life basically at all (Yelena Interview 1).

She also was specific in describing her role as a special education teacher, expressing her passion and skillset for working with children that qualify for a medically fragile (dis)ability category, "My strength I think is with kids who are more like multiple disability, orthopedic impairment, health impacted, that kind of thing. I feel like those are my people" (Yelena Interview 1).

Specifically, Yelena voiced that she does not focus on children with autism, but leaves that to other professionals, “I think ASD is important…that's just not my jam. And some people love it and I just don't” (Yelena Interview 1). Yelena also strongly emphasizes promoting the use of assistive technology for her students and she works to navigate relationships with parents while maintaining teaching self-efficacy.

Assistive Technology

Yelena goes above and beyond her teaching responsibilities to focus on assistive technology to promote increased student communication and mobility. When asked to provide artifacts that represented her teaching identity, she provided an (1) iPad keyguard communication device, and (2) powered wheelchair with adaptive switch. The iPad keyguard represented her resourcefulness in making things that her students need, while the power wheelchair demonstrated her ability to attend conferences and advocate for the children in her class.

The keyguard is a device that Yelena made for her students who have fine motor deficits, making the use of an iPad communication system like Proloquo2go challenging, “So I have kids, that I started on Proloquo… but they have very poor, fine motor skills. So they were having a hard time accessing it. I was like, we need a key guard. I don't want to wait to order a key guard. We have cardboard, a duct tape. So here it is” (Yelena Interview 2). She explained how the keyguard makes it easier for the student to select only one of the communication squares, “It just has a little bit of tactile support to get into the right place. Most of them were kind of just swiping across the whole page…So, yeah, it seems to be helping” (Yelena Interview 2). When asked how this tool represents her teaching identity, she explained her desire to understand the challenges her students face and see past their physical limitations, “And some of it is making

shit up as we go and like, ‘Oh, there's a need to do a thing, let's do it.’ And not just be like, ‘Oh, they can't access Proloquo so they can't use it.’ It's like, no, they cognitively can. Their bodies don't work really well yet, so let's fix it that part” (Yelena Interview 2). Yelena is not talking about fixing the child, rather providing all the necessary tools for the student to access the device on their own.

The adaptive wheelchair showcased her desire to support inclusion by increasing student mobility. The idea of having a powered wheelchair came from personal experience, “So the power chair idea came from a, I mean, obviously my good friend uses a power chair, so power chairs are great” (Yelena Interview 2). Yelena demonstrated a passion for improving the lives of her students as she spent her own time going to professional development workshops and advocating for her students to gain access to power chairs, “I went to a two-day professional development workshop in November...it was all about powered mobility and alternate access for powered mobility and things that you can do through the power chairs to develop access to other devices” (Yelena Interview 2). When Yelena mentioned “access” she was referring to the ability of parents to transport a motorized wheelchair as one might need a specialized vehicle, “But, like I hadn't really thought about pursuing it for my kids at all, primarily because of like transportation issues for the families,” (Yelena Interview 2). Despite her reservations, she still pursued the conference in order to find ways to overcome any roadblocks she might face as she explained, “And it's also some of the idea of like connecting with external resources and like trying to get supports in place. And you know…doing some of the work that is hard for parents to navigate” (Yelena Interview 2). Yelena continues to work for her students within the context of their whole family, not just her classroom.

Navigating Parent Relationships

Yelena described navigating parent relationships as an important part of her work. She described one example where a parent was concerned about their child using the wheelchair, rather placing their hope in the child's ability to move without the chair. When asked how she navigated the parents' concerns, Yelena responded,

> I'm basically just putting her kids in it anyways and seeing what happens. And like that doesn't mean that they have to get one obviously. But her, the older daughter is the one that's using a joystick and like she was begging to get in it. She saw the first kid go in and she was like, my turn, my turn, me, me, me, me, me. My turn, my turn, me and I was like, okay, yup, you can have a turn. Hold on. So I put her in it and like she took off, like she made it through the doorway within a minute. She was like, "Bye!" [Laughs] (Yelena Interview 2).

In this example, Yelena weighs the parents' concerns with a child who does not often communicate expressing an explicit desire for a turn in the motorized chair. While Yelena provides access to the power chair for the student, she continues working on walking as requested by the parent, "So we will still work on it [walking] completely (Yelena Interview 2). Yelena weighs the parent wishes with the needs of the student based on her own experiences as a special education teacher as well as her personal experiences with a friend who required a motorized wheelchair. She explained how necessary the power wheelchair would be to the student as she gets older:

> And even if they do learn how to walk and like can walk fairly successfully, they're not gonna be able to walk fast enough to keep up with her friends. Let's give them a way to

> do that. And like, give them a way to get around middle school by themselves. Once they're middle schoolers and things like that (Yelena Interview 2).

Yelena draws on her friendship with someone who needs a motorized wheelchair as she shared about her friend with a (dis)ability who may have been capable of walking in some circumstances, but preferred a wheelchair in crowded environments,

> Like safety in places where, you know, there isn't somewhere to sit if you need a break or like safety in places where it's crowded and like you get bumped around a lot…Like if it just, even going to the grocery store, that's a lot of walking to make happen. And I get that. It's a huge commitment. It's a huge, it's a huge thing to do. And we can get one and keep it at school, you know. And just have it at school and that's fine (Yelena Interview 2).

In this excerpt, Yelena expresses compassion for families which she interprets as having denial regarding their child's diagnosis, "Sometimes when the kids are little, their [parents] still in denial and still want things to be not disabled" (Yelena Interview 2). Yelena balances student and parent needs through her advocacy, "Like advocating for my kids at school, advocating for my kids when I feel like their parents aren't doing it sometimes, um, connecting families with services outside of school, with supports and whatnot in the community, that kind of thing" (Yelena Interview 1). Yelena is always looking for ways to find new supports for her students through her own professional development.

Teaching Self-Efficacy

While Yelena navigates the relationships between students and their parents, she explains a tension between feeling confident in her teaching skills while also striving to better herself. For example, she is always learning new skills to support her students. When discussing pursuing

motorized wheelchairs for families, she explains that she was pursuing this option to benefit her students while also fulfilling her own drive to learn new things, “The reason I kind of went with that is that I’m semi obsessively always trying to learn new things. I am really interested in assistive technology and trying to get kids able to access their environment as much as possible” (Yelena Interview 1). Not only does Yelena demonstrate a desire to learn about helping her students access their environments, she fully researches each students’ medical conditions to ensure she understand their needs, “I think I view myself as not just a classroom teacher, also super nerdy, I like learning stuff” (Yelena Interview 1). Yelena shared that she perceives others viewing her similarly, “Um, I think a lot of people have referred to me as like knowledgeable, which I appreciate” (Yelena Interview 1). Yelena appreciates acknowledgement of her skills and abilities, and she also wants them to acknowledge how much she cares for her students, “I think I've heard people say things like, sort of along the lines of like, ‘I can tell that you love your students,’ which I appreciate a lot as well” (Yelena Interview 1). It is important for Yelena that others know how much she cares about the progress of her students. While at first, Yelena may appear to have confidence and high levels of teaching self-efficacy, she also expressed moments of doubt:

> I think I was somewhat surprised by the positive feedback that I got from people, because I felt like I had no idea what was going on. And I still feel like things are not as good as they should be. And I probably will always think that they are not as good as they should be. So I think it, I ... it's, it's kind of a weird mix of like, I feel like I'm competent because of what other people say, but I like don't actually believe them in my own head (Yelena Interview 1).

Yelena goes back and forth between demonstrating confidence and doubting her own ability. She recognizes that her teaching self-efficacy is always evolving, “So I try like beginning to see myself as somewhat competent is a process. And one that has ups and downs depending on the day” (Yelena Interview 1). She also explained how her self-efficacy improved since her first-year teaching, “Yeah. I also, my very first year I was the only special education teacher at a school that had never had a program before and that was not fun, at all” (Yelena Interview 1). Yelena explained how having a strong team helped her overcome challenges, “…having a really great team of people that I work with…So having stability is a huge part of that, and like feeling like I'm part of a team is super important” (Yelena Interview 1). With the support of her team, Yelena has remained in the teaching field for more than eight years.

Commitment to The Field

Yelena demonstrates that her commitment to the field is not static and wavers from day to day as well as across years. During Yelena’s first year of teaching, she did not contemplate leaving the field, “I don't think that I ever seriously considered leaving after my first year” (Yelena Interview 3). She then described how she was determined to stay past the five-year mark when many teachers do leave, “I think I had convinced - like basically told myself that I was not gonna be one of the people that leave in the first five years” she said with conviction (Yelena Interview 3). When asked how many days she considers leaving teaching, Yelena indicated that she contemplates leaving the majority of the year, “Most of them. Probably like two-thirds at least…probably more like 150 [days]” (Yelena Interview 3).

Yelena also demonstrated shifts in her commitment across the interview process from Interview 1 on December 12th to Interview 3 on March 4th. In interview 1, Yelena mentioned that her commitment varies but she could not see herself doing anything but teaching, “Well, my

commitment varies day to day…but yeah, it really is all I've done, and it's all I'm trained to do, you know, like, I was trained very specifically to do this," (Yelena Interview 1). She also described how she likes working at her current district because of its diversity, "I feel like, I am in the right district, because I do care about things like social justice, and I don't want it to be easy, and homogenous, and boring" (Yelena Interview 1). Lastly, Yelena mentioned how her team was integral in keeping her committed to her role:

> I really love my kids, and I really love my team. Most of them most of the time. And it is the only thing I've ever done. So I don't know what else to do to some extent. And like, what I've been looking at right now is, can I find a different job that would let me work with these kids in a different way? Or do I have to go back to school to make that happen? (Yelena Interview 1).

At the time of Interview 1, I interpreted this as a self-reflection rather than a foreshadowing. However, by Interview 3, Yelena disclosed that she intended to take prerequisites for a nursing program to eventually leave her teaching job, "And I like truthfully am signed up to start taking pre-reqs to go to back to school" (Yelena Interview 3). Despite her current wavering commitment to the field, she provides a wealth of advice for newer special education teachers.

Advice for New Teachers

When asked what advice Yelena would give to new special education teachers, she immediately replied by suggesting that they maintain their mental health, "Go to therapy with a good therapist" (Yelena Interview 3). She also explained the importance of finding balance between work and life, "Figure out the balance of staying late or doing work on the weekend because you'll feel like the balance of being stressed out because you don't have stuff done

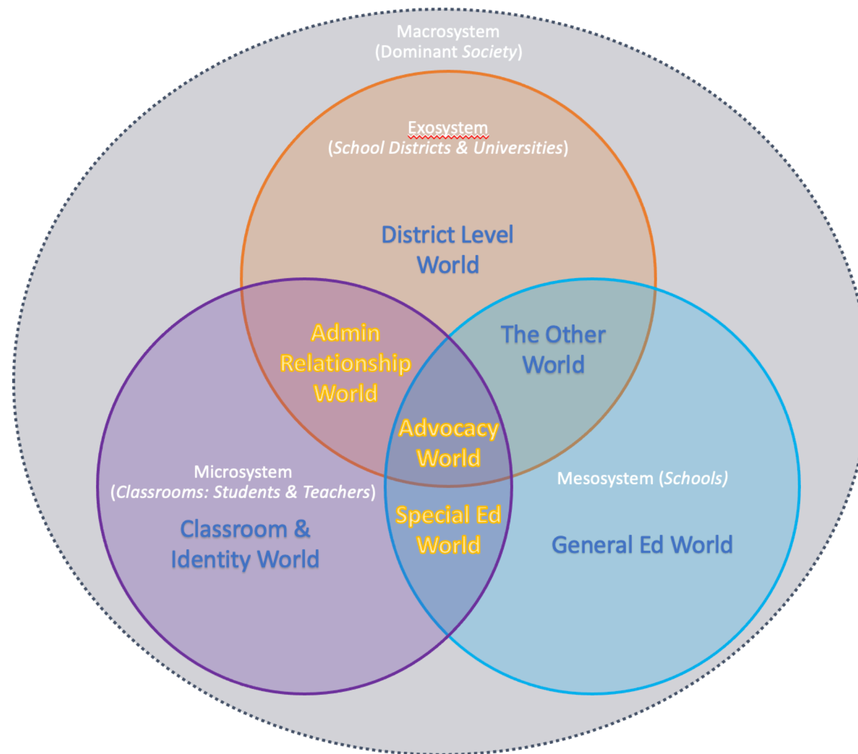
versus being stressed out because you've done too much work” (Yelena Interview 3). While she used general advice for work-life balance, she emphasized the importance of figuring out your own schedule, “Like figuring out that balance is important and it's different for everybody” (Yelena Interview 3). She also recommended that beginning teachers continue to learn, “And try to learn lots of thing” (Yelena Interview 3). She also suggests that new teachers make friends with building staff members, “Make friends with the office manager and the custodian” (Yelena Interview 3). Finally, Yelena encourages beginning teachers to advocate for their students’ needs, “…And save your fights for important fights. Like, pick your battles basically. Yeah” (Yelena Interview 3).

CHAPTER 5: CROSS CASE ANALYSIS OF INTERCONNECTED FIGURED WORLDS

The purpose of this chapter is to present a cross case analysis of how participants navigate factors related to their teaching positions, such as key relationships and job responsibilities, across ecological micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro systems that uphold dominant systems of oppression. This study explored how these factors supported teachers' decisions to remain committed to their role as special educators. In Brownell et al.'s (1993) ecological model, Brownell and colleagues present four nested systems starting with (1) the classroom as a large overarching circle representing dominant societal views (macrosystem), within which is nested the (2) the school district (exosystem), (3) the school building (mesosystem), and (4) lastly, the classroom (microsystem) [see Figure 1]. Data from this study indicated that special education teachers' figurative worlds are not nested, as in Brownell et al.'s ecological model, rather they are interconnected as shown in Figure 15.

Figure 15

Ecological System of Interconnected Figured Worlds



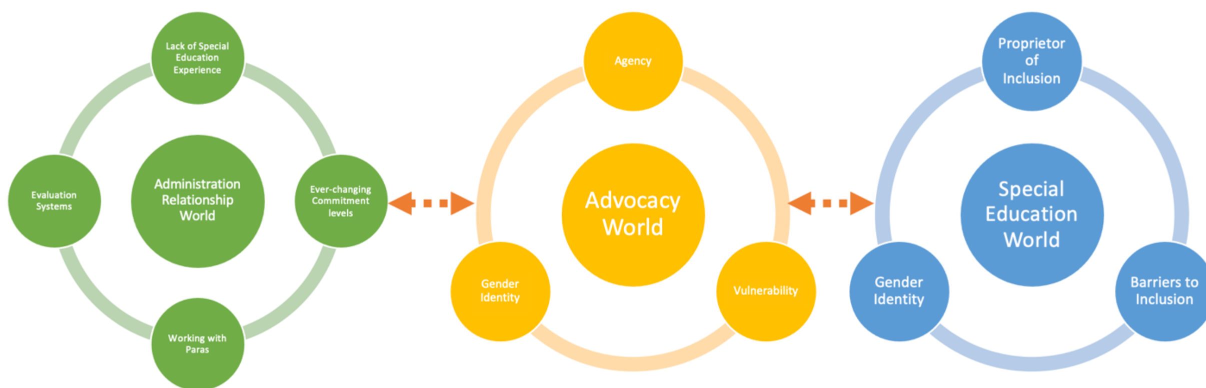
According to Holland et al. (1998), teacher identity development is a dynamic process occurring across multiple *figured worlds*. The special education teachers in this study described experiencing three worlds, (1) Classroom and identity world, (2) general education, and (3) district level world. These three worlds are nested within the macrosystem, which includes dominant societal norms, which influences each figured world and the ways in which they interact. Thereby, dominant normative standards that uphold ableism and racism may influence all subsequent worlds and how teachers navigate between these worlds. The influence of the macrosystm will be discussed further as it relates to gender identity and critical inclusion.

In Chapter 4, I discussed the microsystem, Classroom and Identity World, which included excerpts about participants' (a) personal identity, (b) teaching identity, and (c) overall commitment to the field. In this chapter, the cross case analysis, I will analysis will examine

where the worlds interconnect, (a) Admin Relationship World, (b) Advocacy World, and (c) Special Education World [shown as yellow text in Figure 16]. This analysis identifies differences and similarities across cases within these three interconnected *figured worlds* as shown in Figure 16.

Figure 16

Interconnected Figured Worlds



Administrator Relationship World Cross Case Analysis

The relationship between teachers and their administrators came up as the most frequently coded excerpt, whether at the building or district level. Not only was it the most frequent code across participants, but it was also a common co-occurring code across topics, including (1) lack of special education background, (2) evaluation systems, (3) paraprofessionals, and (4) ever-changing commitment levels [See Figure 16]. This may indicate that the relationship with administrators heavily influenced many aspects of the special education teachers' figured worlds. Participants described their interactions with administrators in either positive or negative tones, suggesting that these relationships hindered or strengthened teachers' perception of their jobs. Also, participants noted variances between *building* and *district* administrators. *Building* administration usually included principals, vice principals and

leadership team members whereas *district* administrators included special education administrators and superintendents.

Lack of Special Education Experience

The participants in this study are experienced educators in the field of special education, yet they noted that many of their administrators lack special education knowledge. All five participants described the frustration of working with administrators who had little to no special education backgrounds. Nathan and Teddy expressed frustrations when administrators set unrealistic expectations and micromanaged their job. Yelena shared that she felt her self-contained program and her teaching were not priorities of her administration. While April expressed strong negative feelings towards administrators without special education backgrounds, she was able to provide a contrasting example of a previous district administrator who started her career as a special education teacher and was supportive of April. Lastly, while Monique shared frustrations similar to the other participants, she suggested that administrators could be trained to have more special education knowledge.

Teddy explained that he had never worked for a building level administrator with special education experience, “I, in my years in my district, I don't think I've ever had a principal who has been incredibly well versed with sped” (Teddy Interview 2). Teddy expressed feeling that his administrator micromanages his daily tasks, which he finds counterproductive:

> There's so much being asked of me in the first place, I don't like being pulled in directions that I don't need to be pulled in. I feel like my current administrator is pulling in directions that are exhausting my time and energy in ways that I think are wasteful. And, it's made me consider where my near future looks like (Teddy Interview 2).

This statement suggests that he might consider leaving his current building because of this pressure felt from his principal.

Nathan also explained the tension when asked to complete tasks that are not applicable to his daily work, “I think, I would say there was one instance where I felt that the admin wanted me to do certain things, but they didn't know how to tell me what to do - because special ed is so different” (Nathan Interview 2). Nathan provided an example of when his administrator asked for lesson plans, but as a special education teacher his approach to planning was different:

> Like, if you say in special ed, ‘Hey, I wanna see your lesson plans,’ you know, realistically, most special ed teachers, at least the ones that I know, don't have a set of lesson plans they're gonna go off of. They have an idea of what they're gonna work through, and we're gonna see how far we get… So, it was more maybe a mismatch of what they were asking us to do. (Nathan Interview 2).

Yelena described this disconnect as a constant misfit, “Within the system, a lot of times I feel like a square peg in a triangular hole” (Yelena Interview 2). She went on to explain how working with special education administrators who do not understand the intricacies of special education is “annoying” and “challenging":

> And like, I always say, ‘We [special education] are the 1%,’ we are the exception to the exception to the exception. We're not doing grade level things...having administrators who don't understand anything about our kids is annoying and challenging (Yelena Interview 2).

April expressed similar feelings, using the word “loathe” when describing one of her district administrators, “There is one more person that I absolutely loathe that works in our district, and I am not the only one… Like, she'll say things, and you're like, ‘That doesn't even make sense

though,' you know?" (April Interview 2). She explained how the administrator's lack of special education knowledge resulted in a lack of trust across special education teachers, "And, when she said that this year, I remember all the SpEd teachers were like, 'I'm not listening to that. That's horse crap'" (April Interview 2). Although April struggled with administrators who had no experience, she acknowledged that over the years, she had worked with some helpful administrators:

> Over the years I've worked for our district, we've had a lot of actually transitions from our directors, and we've had a lot of movement; which sucked, because they were really good…she was always really supportive of the teachers, of me. I always really appreciated her support. I think she started off as a teacher in Special Ed, and so she was very knowledgeable of what it really looked like. I always appreciated that about her, and felt like, if you ever had a problem, you could totally call her, and she would help you (April Interview 2).

Monique also acknowledged the challenge of administrators lacking special education knowledge, but posed a potential solution. First, Monique explained that her principal's knowledge of special education was only the result of time spent in her [Monique's] classroom, "I had the assistant principals, so the only knowledge she has is what she's seen in my classroom really, because she's been my evaluator for the last four ... I think this is the fourth year running" (Monique Interview 2). This is concerning given that Monique is in her 14th year of teaching and her building administrator has been evaluating her for four years with very limited special education experience. As an experienced teacher, Monique would benefit from an evaluator with at least some special education training and background. Monique spent time discussing her frustration with her administrator's lack of experience and suggested that special education

directors spend time training and meeting with principals to share information about the field:

> Do they ever go to the principal's meetings, you know…that was my question? [laughs] Do they ever go to these meetings and say this is what we'd like to see? Would they be talking to all the principals at the same time with the principals' supervisors, you know and see if they could make any leeway with that. But I don't think they do (Monique Interview 2).

From Monique's perspective, it would be beneficial if administrators with special education backgrounds could train principals. All of the participants expressed frustration that their building administrator had very little special education experience which led to conversations about teacher evaluation.

Evaluation systems

Despite the lack of special education experience, building level administrators were still responsible for the evaluation of teacher participants. Each participant handled their expressed frustration in different ways from embracing the evaluation system to disregarding the process. Yelena and Monique found the evaluation process time consuming and disruptive to their day-to-day teaching. Teddy and April shared indifference to the process, and Nathan expressed an appreciation for his evaluation, believing it benefited his teaching skills. Monique shared that although she was frustrated with her administrator's lack of special education knowledge, she appreciated the efficient of the process, "And last year's comprehensive was easier than the other two, just because this was a different principal" (Monique Interview 2). She noted that the process took away from her "joy" of teaching, "It's just a lot - rather than focus on the joy of teaching" (Monique Interview 2). Similarly, Yelena expressed complete disdain for the evaluation process because of the time she perceived that it took away from teaching her

students:

> I don't care if you think you're in charge if you are doing a shitty job, like I don't have time for that, yeah. So similarly, like I don't have time for your stupid evaluation system that does not help me be a better teacher. And I told my principal that and he was not surprised I don't think, and just kind of laughed and rolled his eyes. So, you know, I work hard for my kids, but like I don't have time for your stupid stuff (Yelena Interview 2).

While Yelena shared strong feelings against the process, Teddy expressed indifference, “To me it's actually kind of like a formality. Just being honest” (Teddy Interview 2). When asked if he valued the evaluation scores, he explained, “No…it's one of those things where there's so many other things that, that I as a sped teacher have to worry about. And this isn't one of them” (Teddy Interview 2).

April pointed out the absence of applicable feedback from her building administrator during the evaluation process:

> It’s kind of hard for her. Like, I don't blame her for that. She was never taught it [special education]. How could she know? But, she doesn't ever say like, ‘You should improve this, or do,’ you know, and rightfully so. I would feel probably a little insulted if she tried to tell me what to do (April Interview 2).

April acknowledged her administrators’ limited special education knowledge while expressing gratitude that they did not try to overreach and provide advice without the necessary experience.

Every participant except Nathan described opposition or indifference towards the evaluation process. In contrast, Nathan expressed an appreciation for the process:

> I have always felt that our evaluation system, and this is gonna sound weird, but, if you are a teacher who is driven to do better, regardless of the information that you put in your evaluation, it will reflect that (Nathan Interview 2).

Nathan's perspective may come from his own leadership perspective. He stated, "Because it is away for your principals to get to know your staff" (Nathan Interview 2), which acknowledges how the administrator might benefit from the process because they would have an opportunity to learn about each teacher and classroom. This highlights how he reflects on his leadership experience to see things from the administrator perspective.

Collaborating with Paraprofessionals

A large part of the special education teachers' role is the supervision of paraprofessionals. While teachers supervise the day-to-day roles of paraprofessionals, administrators have the ultimate authority in regard to paraprofessionals. Thus, when administrators insert themselves into the teacher-paraprofessional relationship it may increase or decrease tension. Both Yelena and April described how paraprofessional conflict can lead to feelings of despair without appropriate administration support. Contrastingly, Monique and Teddy described their paraprofessional relationships as insulating them *from* administration, creating a reason for them to stay in the building despite conflict with administrators. Administrators played a role in helping or exacerbating tensions between teachers and paraprofessionals.

April explained how conflict with paraprofessionals directly impacted her job, and how not having administration support, compounded the situation. She expressed frustration with the inability of paraprofessionals to stay after school to help prepare for the next day, which was something she had experienced in the past, but was not currently happening, "Yeah, I would say the last three years I've had groups of paras that can stay after school. So, we would go over

things… Like, so they would always put that extra minute.” (April Interview 3). April needed additional support from her administrator to allow for the time to team with paraprofessionals without students present. Normally, a paraprofessional is only paid to stay when the children are present, but districts may choose to pay paraprofessionals for additional time to prepare and have meetings with teachers.

Teddy, however, described how his administrator supported time with paras outside of school hours, “I am able to have, meetings with my paras to get on the same page, with what I expect from the kids that day or from one particular student, or whatever that might be…and paras, will come and we can share together. When we have meetings like that, when we have open communication,” (Teddy Interview 1). In addition to having additional hours with his paraeducators, he also was included in the hiring process for paraprofessionals:

> I think one thing that has been great recently has been that I've been in, interview sessions for new paras that come through. It's been nice to be a part of that process because, you know, I understand the classroom. I understand the culture in my classroom and I understand basically what it takes to work with a student with special needs now at this point in my career (Teddy Interview 2).

He went on to explain how meaningful it was for him to have an administrator involve him in the process, “Being asked by an administrator to be a part of that conversation has been really helpful for me because that way I'm not just getting some random person off the street to come step in the classroom” (Teddy Interview 2).

While Teddy explained feeling valued in the hiring process by administrators, Yelena described a different perspective of these administrators, despite working in the same building as Teddy. Yelena described a situation where paraprofessionals complained about her teaching to

the principal, and the principal's response left her feeling alienated and unsupported:

> I had another super uncomfortable conversation with my principal… because I guess a couple of my paras had gone to talk to him and the one who's super type A was like, 'We used to be doing all of these things and like we're not doing them anymore. And then the quality of our classroom has decreased. And like Yelena is not telling us what she wants us to be doing and all that kind of stuff' (Yelena Interview 1).

Yelena expressed being upset with her principal's response to the paraprofessionals and described how she responded to the incident: "I cried a lot and then, uh, talked about a lot of things that made him uncomfortable. Um, and then I left. [laughs] I didn't go back to class…So that was probably among the highest, most significantly vulnerable moments" (Yelena Interview 2). She disclosed that part of what made the administrator uncomfortable was because she felt forced to share personal information about her own mental health as a defense.

Overall, Yelena felt that the administrator did not attend to the needs of her classroom or students. She explained, "I don't want to say that they deprioritized our program, but in a lot of ways it is not, it's just not the biggest priority. And that is frustrating to me sometimes and I also get it. But it also sucks" (Yelena Interview 1). The conflict with paraprofessionals created tension with her classroom team, and the administrator calling Yelena to his office hindered her relationship with him, leaving her feeling completely alone and unsupported at her school.

Despite working with the same administrators as Yelena, Teddy described very different experiences with administration. When asked if paras had complained to the principal about him, Teddy responded, "not to my knowledge" (Teddy Interview 2). Teddy shared that he sometimes had disagreements with paraprofessionals, but they were quickly resolved within the classroom, not involving administrators, "And that's gonna happen. I mean you're gonna have disagreements

with people because you have, you have to teach kids and you have to work with adults. Like that, that special ed just so unique in that way" (Teddy Interview 2). The contrast between Teddy and Yelena's paraprofessional and administration interference may be related to gender differences to be discussed in the subsequent section, Teacher Gender Identity.

While Teddy expressed minimal short-lived conflict with paraprofessionals, Monique shared that her paraprofessional team is her greatest support system, "I feel like I've been able to be a better teacher because of her being a para with me…we kind of bounce off of each other, you know, different ideas. And she's a really good team member." (Monique Interview 1). One of her paras has worked with her for six years contributing to the high level of teamwork between the two of them.

Ever-changing Commitment Levels

The relationship between administrators and teachers may influence teachers' commitment levels. While there are other protective factors influencing teachers' decisions to stay in the field, each participant described their relationship with administrators as a protective or risk factor related to commitment levels. Teddy, Monique, and Yelena cited administrators as reasons they contemplated leaving the field. Contrastingly, April and Nathan listed administrators as protective factors.

April attributes her high level of commitment to the field to her administrators, "I'm also very lucky to have *some* people around me, like Jenny and Samantha [both administrators] … that are pretty amazing people. So, when I do have moments, I talk to them…" (April Interview 3). When April was asked why some special education teachers leave the field, she cited a lack of support from administrators as a probable cause, "So, I think lack of that, people around you that are knowledgeable in the field too, that you can talk to and or brainstorm with, is probably a

huge piece" (April Interview 3). April experienced a strong relationship with some district administrators, but acknowledged that not all teachers have this same opportunity. While she spoke positively of her current district administrators, April shared frustrations with administrators she has worked with in the past:

> The last two weeks actually have been super shitty and I every day I'm like, fuck, I don't want to be at work right now. And it's not the kids, it's never the kids. Tt's my paras this week, before it's been admin, you know, like it's always, it's never been the kids (April Interview 2).

April demonstrates a high commitment to her work with students despite struggles with administration, which she acknowledged change over time.

Monique also demonstrated a strong sense of commitment to her job, aside from mentioning potential retirement in the unforeseeable future. When asked if Monique considered leaving because of her strained relationship with administration, she replied, "Um, no because I did have a good team. And I ended up, like with the para that I mentioned is very dear to me. And so, I really felt like I could get through it" (Monique Interview 2). Despite her struggles with administrators, she remains committed and dedicated to her students and the paraprofessionals in her class.

While Teddy described feeling supported by his principal regarding paraprofessional support, he also described frustrations with his building administrators and how this relationship impacted his commitment:

> There's so much being asked of me in the first place. I don't like being pulled in directions that I don't need to be pulled in. And I feel like my current administrator is pulling in directions that are exhausting my time and energy in ways that I think are

> wasteful. It's made me, you know, consider what my near future looks like (Teddy Interview 1).

At the end, Teddy's mention of his "near future" references how he sometimes considers moving school buildings to get away from his principal. He then carefully described how his relationship with his close team of paraprofessionals and teachers insulates him from the frustration with administrators, "Right now it's [his team of paraprofessionals] probably the biggest reason why I'm staying at the school that I'm at now. I tell people all the time that if it wasn't for this strong collaborative group I probably would've gone even before this year" (Teddy Interview 2).

Yelena did not have that same relationship with paraprofessionals and did not trust her administrators, which made her commitment variable:

> Well, my commitment varies day to day. I don't think I'm going to [stay], is the short answer of that. More for my own mental health, than for a desire to leave. I mean like, I think I need to leave, I don't necessarily want to leave (Yelena Interview 3).

This quote highlights the tension Yelena feels about leaving versus staying. When asked why other special education teachers leave, Yelena explained,

> I think there's a lot of, 'I can't handle the time and the stress anymore. It's taking over my life'… I'm so sick of bureaucracy and like being asked to do stupid Gen Ed things [general education trainings and evaluations] that don't help my kids' (Yelena Interview 3)

She clarifies that her passion is with helping her students achieve their goals, "The kids are awesome! And it is really exciting when like they make progress" (Yelena Interview 3). Yelena went back and forth on her commitment, sharing the joys and pitfalls of her job.

While Nathan demonstrates a strong commitment to the field, he too has days that challenge his commitment:

> I would probably say I've probably thought about leaving more so this year than in years past…you build yourself a system in place and you say, 'Okay, I know this system works. Let me use this system'…And when somebody comes in and questions your system, and then you need to completely change it because X, Y, and Z, it's very, it's very disheartening. I feel like we are, and I mean, I feel like this, all teachers let alone just special ed teachers, we are constantly asked to do more with the amount of time we have (Nathan Interview 3).

In this statement, Nathan is referencing administration when he says "somebody" comes in and questioning systems (Nathan Interview 3). While on one hand, Nathan described feeing "disheartened," on the other hand, his leadership role may insulate him and increase his motivation to stay, "I think as department head…our special education, boss over the district office, I think she has a lot of faith in me, and I think that she puts things on my plate that she feels I can do (Nathan Interview 3). Another time, Nathan mentioned feeling well respected in the school community, "So I feel like I'm well respected in the community. I feel like if I mention things, people listen, which is always nice. [Laughs]. I'm not just talking for fun. Uh, yeah, so I feel like overall, I'm well respected, Overall" (Nathan Interview 1). Nathan remains committed to the field, citing administrators' and colleagues' respect as protective factors.

Advocacy World Cross Case Analysis

At the center of the model is the interconnection of all three systems (1) Classroom and Identity World, (2) District Level World, and (3) General Ed World [Figure 15], which all

operate within the Dominant Society World. The point of intersection is the Advocacy World, where teachers balance feelings of vulnerability and agency.

Agency versus Vulnerability

Each participant expressed having varying levels of agency versus vulnerability. As outlined in Chapter 2, teachers may experience tension between a sense of agency in making independent choices, while also feeling vulnerable and powerless in their teaching positions. Each participant expressed having agency most of the time, although Nathan's leadership role gave him the most agency as compared to other participants. Teachers felt a strong sense of agency when advocating for student needs. They expressed feeling vulnerable when working with parents and scheduling at the building level.

April talked about having a sense of agency most of the time, "I would say two thirds is agency" (April Interview 1). She went on to explain "I feel very blessed that I have had the opportunity with my school and principals that I've had, have provided me with a lot of agency" (April Interview 1). When April has moments of vulnerability, they are around scheduling at the building level and working with parents. When working with parents, April described frustration when her high expectations for students don't align with parent goals:

> And that always like makes me sad because I can see how much potential there is. And the, it's a little bit of it is getting squandered because they're not being pushed at home. And I would say that the kids that I see the most growth in are ones that everything's happening together, at home, at school, and we're in partnership. Like, parents tell me what they're doing and vice versa (April Interview 1).

April values a partnership with parents and it she has an emotional response when she is not able to demonstrate agency in this situation. Instead, the parents' goals outweigh her own desires.

April also described lacking agency when she scheduled her students outside of her classroom. She notes how schedules are critical to inclusion opportunities, but she feels a sense of vulnerability when she is not able to contribute to the building schedule, "I would say with the scheduling piece, can be very frustrating because it has such a huge impact on them and their school year, and nobody listens to me [laughs]" (April Interview 1). This lack of agency creates an emotional response in April and makes her frustrated and sad.

Teddy described having a sense of agency about half of the time, "I'd say maybe - I'd say probably about half" (Teddy Interview 1). Teddy's agency and vulnerability was directly impacted by his building administrator, "The last year and a half, so now, so last year and this current school year, I have felt probably the least amount of agency than I've ever had in the rest of my 10 years of teaching" (Teddy Interview 1). He explained, "I feel like the current administrator that I have now, um... How do you describe it? He's a micromanager… I don't like feeling micromanaged, especially when it comes to working with special needs kids because I already feel micromanaged by the state federal government" (Teddy Interview 1). Feeling a lack of agency contributes to Teddy's vulnerability in the workplace and thereby, his commitment to his school building is waning.

Monique described maintaining a strong sense of agency within her school building. One example she provided was when she advocated for more paraprofessional support for students who needed extra help, "So I had to get the data together…We put the matrix together and anecdotes, we had teachers like the special ed teachers writing notes too…So yeah, that's one time when I really felt like I had advocated in the biggest way" (Monique Interview 1). While Monique expressed having agency, she also relied on her team of paraprofessionals and herself to get support for her students, "I just kept talking to my team. It did not do any good to talk to

my principal. That's not the principal that we have here now” (Monique Interview 1). With support from her team, Monique’s agency was self-motivated and self-sustained.

When asked what percentage of the time Yelena felt agency versus vulnerability, she responded that she felt she had agency in her work 75% of the time, whereas 25% of the time she experiences vulnerability, “The first thing that came to mind was like 75, 25…I have a decent amount of leeway in times when I'm like, ‘This isn't gonna work for me.’ And they're like, ‘Okay.’” (Yelena Interview 1). Yelena then gave several examples of times when she was frustrated with feelings of vulnerability, “Oh yeah. Lack of control happens constantly. Um, some of which is I guess in a vulnerable way” (Yelena Interview 1). In one example, she reported a coworker engaging in tactics she believed to be illegal:

> I had been sort of casually mentioning to one of my coworkers that some of what she was doing was wildly illegal, because it was mechanical restraint of students for behavioral quantification purposes. And then I stopped being casual about it and sent her a US Department of Ed memo…And so I had a really uncomfortable conversation with my administrators. And I basically was like, "I have tried to do what I know how to do and I am out of ideas, and it's not my job. So, it would be really solid if you could like do a thing." It didn't go well (Yelena Interview 1).

In this situation, Yelena went above and beyond to address the issue but was given pushback by administrators. Although Yelena acknowledges having agency more often than not, the moments of vulnerability she did experience felt overwhelming, taking up a lot of time and energy.

While most participants described having a mix of agency versus vulnerability, Nathan confidently described his strong sense of agency, “I'm one of those implementers, and I feel like… as far as my day to day goes with my kids, I am their advocate. If there's a class they don't

prefer, if there's a situation that they have that I can help with, I do" (Nathan Interview 1). He then referred to his special education team's ability to focus on students' well-being, "The nice thing about special ed…I don't know how other special ed teams work. But I know, this special ed team, we always kind of ask ourselves like, 'Are we doing what's right for the kids?'" (Nathan Interview 1). Nathan also explains how his leadership role provides him with an extensive amount of agency, "So, I'm the department head for special education... All sped teachers kind of fall underneath my umbrella" (Nathan Interview 1). Nathan's leadership role puts him in charge of advocating for all the special education programs in his building.

Teacher Gender Identity

Findings suggest that teachers' gender may have influenced their advocacy. Teddy and Yelena were teachers in the same school building but described different experiences that may be the result of their gender (Teddy identifies as a man and Yelena identifies as a woman). In the example in Chapter 5, Yelena felt unsupported with paraprofessionals, while Teddy described being allowed to interview paraprofessionals in a leadership role. When asked about her gender identity, Yelena described struggles she has experienced as a woman developing relationships with the families of her students, "Um, and I've been more successful developing relationships with some families than with others. Um, some of which I think is because I'm a female and I've had some families where like the, it's just very like men oriented…The patriarchy" (Yelena Interview 1). On the other hand, Teddy explicitly expressed his male privilege, "I think being a man in this field is very unique, at least from my observation as the case and not to mention from, other people that have kind of told me that" (Teddy Interview 1). Teddy described his perceived benefits of being a male teacher in two ways 1) as a role model for students and 2) enhanced relationships with parents.

Teddy expressed beliefs that since most elementary teachers are women, male students may want male teachers. First, he draws from his own experiences as a student, “It was really, unique and there was a difference in my motivation having a male teacher because I had someone who was like me” (Teddy Interview 1). He went on to explain that he felt that he could relate more to male teacher figures, “Education felt different to me because I had a man teaching me, having like a man teach a boy how to learn certain things and socially like functional skills and whatnot, and I'm wondering if that's potentially the way that some of the boys at least will, will view me as well” (Teddy Interview 1).

In regard to working with families, Teddy recognizes his own privilege engaging with certain cultures who may prioritize male teachers. During his explanation, he used a lot of filler phrasing and even words like “sad,” indicating what may be discomfort or hesitation when talking about male privilege:

> Um, and I'm not saying that that always happens or anything, but I would say that from my experience, I feel like that's probably what's happening. Um, and I, I would say even also too, and this is the, the sad truth, is that I've, I've definitely felt over the years, um, the difference in how certain families interact with me, um, culturally, because there's a lot of cultures, especially Eastern cultures that, um, uh, unfortunately, you know, they, they value the opinion of a man over a woman. So, you know, for me it's not as challenging or as difficult to try to get a point across or to, or to, um, or to request something or whatnot, um, because I'm a man. And, um, and like I said, it's a sad truth, but it is something that has definitely been noticeable to me, um, over the last, uh, 10 years” (Teddy Interview 1).

While on one hand, Teddy speaks apologetically about his privilege as a male in the field of

teaching, he did mention feeling isolated at times as the only male in a female dominated world, "I have I felt… a distinct minority in that way - to me is something that's been very unique and it hasn't really affected how I teach or how I find my identity in something but it's definitely been something that's been one of the elephants in the room, I don't know how to describe it. It's been very obvious because there have been programs, I taught in where I've been the only male anywhere. I've been the only male teacher and para, um, in the entire program. So, um, yeah, I think that that's, maybe the best way I can answer that" (Teddy Interview 1). Both Teddy and April spoke of noticing the different experiences they noticed based on gender. It is also noteworthy that while Teddy and Yelena work in the same building, their experiences with administrators and paraprofessionals were quite different.

Special Education World Cross Case Analysis

The intersection of the classroom and general education classroom is called the Special Education World and it exists because of the overlap between the participants' classrooms and what they perceived as *others*, the general education classrooms, teachers, and students. The segregation resulting from ableism creates the special education context because only when some students are labeled non-(dis)abled and others are categorized as having (dis)abilities does the Special Education World exist. The overwhelming theme related to this intersection of worlds is inclusion practices or lack thereof. Participants shared (1) they are the sole proprietor of inclusion in their schools and (2) schools either have strong or a complete lack of inclusion opportunities.

The Proprietor of Inclusion

All participants agreed that the ownness for inclusion belonged to the individual teachers and their relationships within school buildings. They reported using their team or their own

authority to achieve inclusion opportunities for their students through persuasion or more forceful means. In the end, they describe inclusion as the result of their efforts and the general education teachers *allowing* for inclusion in their classroom.

Monique explained how inclusion at her school required both principal and general education teacher permission. She likened herself to a public relations (PR) professional trying to convince people to engage in inclusive practices, “The building really has to, well be planned in order to have inclusion. And the principal has be behind it and get their teachers' support…It's PR” (Monique Interview 3). Nathan was more forceful, explaining that he tells teachers when they will include his students rather than ask, “It's almost more of an informational. Like, ‘Hey, I'm informing you we, we gotta do this’" (Nathan Interview 1). Similarly, Yelena teamed with other special education teachers in her building, “A couple of years ago when we decided we were just going to do more inclusion, and we basically were just like, "This is a thing that's happening” (Yelena Interview 1). Yelena also points out the importance of building relationships with general education teachers, “Having positive relationships with my like grade level people, has enabled some of the inclusion and some of the things that like I want to do as a special ed teacher has enabled that to happen” (Yelena Interview 2). This process took time, which means that only teachers who stayed multiple years built the social capitol to advance inclusion.

Teddy explained how support for inclusion varies across administrators, with some in his past being more supportive than his current principal, “I've had, administrators before that have been very accommodating of inclusion and some that have not been as vocal about being as accommodating” (Teddy Interview 2). He acknowledged that he was responsible for inclusion despite what administrators may or may not have done to help, “And the kind of lack of trust that happens, now with the teachers and stuff. It's helped shape, for me a way to be better at

inclusion" (Teddy Interview 2). Teddy noted that his school's commitment to inclusion may even influence his commitment to stay in the field, "I think that's like a major part of my identity is being able to feel like we all feel wanted by the staff here. And they want to work with our kids. And that's a good reason to stay" (Teddy Interview 2). Teddy's comment about "feeling wanted" indicates that he takes it personally how much or little teachers agree to having his students in their classrooms.

When April was asked if general education teachers support her inclusion efforts, she replied, "No, not really…They support my kids once they're in there, sort of, right?" (April Interview 2). She described a situation when a teacher collaborated for "a moment" and how it made her feel, "I did have one teacher... had one of my students in his class, and him and I collaborated for a moment about some assignments to adapt for that kid. So, I guess, yeah, that. That, that was pretty awesome. I would say for the most part, the only kind of support I get from them is just having them [students] in the class" (April Interview 2). All of the participants, including April, are responsible for instigating and sustaining inclusion efforts which further perpetuates *us/them* narratives in relation to general education versus special education teachers.

Barriers to Inclusion

Overall, the lack of systematic inclusion resulted in individualized inclusion programs that will only last as long as the teacher organizing them remains in the school building. In a meeting with a district administrator, April shared a story where she pushed back when an administrator claimed they were engaging in inclusive practices:

> You can call it something else, but it's not inclusion. So, of course it's terrible. We're not really doing it. … she didn't say anything when I made my comment, and I just was like,

> you're not smart when it comes to this stuff, and here you are leading our district (April Interview 2).

April further explains why what her district administrator refers to as inclusion is not really inclusion "What we're doing is, we throw kids in a Gen-Ed class without support. That's not inclusion. That's having a Gen-Ed, or a SPED kid be in a Gen-Ed classroom sitting there by themselves, chilling. Like, that's not inclusion" (April Interview 2). April believes inclusion should result in the student working with the class on curriculum adapted to meet their needs.

Not only did April push against the exclusion of her students, but she too experienced being ostracized as a special education teacher. April described a situation where the principal of her school forgot to introduce her as a teacher at an assembly, "Then she forgot me introducing staff. Um, I was the only teacher she forgot. I'm also the only Special Ed teacher that teaches, um, the functional skills and academics class" (April Interview 1). She went on to explain how this made her feel, "And like, obviously, I was hurt, but I was also like, 'Really? What about my kids?'" (April Interview 1). In this example, April felt rejection for her students as well as herself as an educator in front of her colleagues.

Monique explained that her school's inclusion program is nearly non-existent, due to the lack of leadership at the building level:

> It's pretty far behind. I would say it's a little closer to rock bottom... I think the principal's vision is to get better with it, but it's going to take a few years before they even start to try to do some inclusion as far as getting the building to be on the same page. Everybody, all the teachers, it's gonna take a bit. It's going to take a while (Monique Interview 3).

When asked why she thinks they are resistant to inclusion, she shook her head and said, "I think they still view them as,- as just, too different. Yeah. So." (Monique Interview 3). Monique sat in

silence after answering this question, with what I perceived as sadness based on body language and facial expressions.

While Monique described her school building's overall lack of structural supports for inclusion, Teddy explained how the building schedule often favored individuals without (dis)abilities, which limited opportunities for inclusion:

> If I had a magic wand it would be that, being able to, like a more consistent schedule. That's like a school wide schedule that is more accommodating for sped students. Because pretty much the schedule that's put together by our administration, you know, it basically only really considers the gen ed students. And we're kind of the ones who are, I wouldn't say we're neglected or left behind, but we definitely are not put on the same high-priority list as some other classrooms are (Teddy Interview 2).

Teddy notes some inclusive practices at his school but points out how more thoughtful scheduling and structure changes could improve inclusion.

Yelena has developed relationships over time and feels her students have access to inclusion as a result of her efforts:

> Mine and my paras responsibility. So, I have one kiddo who only goes in for music and library. Everybody else goes in for like morning meeting and everybody does music and library. Two kids do PE…And then like some of them do read aloud. Some of them do handwriting among them. Oh, and then I have one kindergarten who goes in for work time, which is like semi free choice time (Yelena Interview 2).

When asked what she would change about inclusion at her school, she responded:

> I think that it would be really lovely to have smaller class sizes. I think there are a lot of kids who end up getting more special ed services than they would necessarily need if

> there were fewer kids in the class. And that is more so like the high incidents gets. But a lot of kids on the spectrum that ended up needing more support than they would if there was a little bit more space and less overstimulation (Yelena Interview 2).

Yelena suggests that with smaller class sizes, more children would be able to remain in a general education setting and not need to be pulled out to a quieter self-contained environment.

In Nathan's school, they are working on implementing a co-teaching model in which special education teachers work alongside general education teachers. This experience highlights a shift from the Special Education World to the General Education World. Nathan explains, "The co-teaching model is preferred, uh, with the right training" (Nathan Interview 2). He explained that the co-teaching model takes planning and intentionality, "There is definitely leg work that goes into building a good co-teach model" (Nathan Interview 1). He warns about jumping into a co-teaching model without guidance, "A lot of people say, 'We're gonna go to co-teach model,' and they just slam two teachers together and let them run. We specifically set up a training the last day of school" (Nathan Interview 1). Nathan explained the importance of finding the right co-teaching pair while defining each of their roles, "They are the content specialists. I am the delivery specialist, so I modify and accommodate based on what we see. My accommodations and modifications are particular to my students, but the way I explain things is universal" (Nathan Interview 1). Nathan's co-teaching model serves as an inclusion opportunity for his students that other participants do not report experiencing.

Summary

As participants described their experiences as special education teachers, they discussed risk and protective factors across the three interconnected worlds of (1) Administration Relationship World, (2) Advocacy World, and (3) Special Education World. Factors included in

these figured worlds served as either a protective or risk factor depending on the situation. For example, support from some district administrators insulated April from losing commitment to her job. Alternatively, conflict with a different district administrator served as a factor hindering her commitment to the field. For Monique and Yelena, their paraprofessional relationships differed and so did their commitment to the field. While Monique cited her paraprofessionals as the reason for staying in her job, conflict with paraprofessionals led Yelena to question whether she should remain in the position. For Nathan, his leadership role served as a protective factor in remaining a special education teacher.

While teachers described protective and risk factors relating to their commitment to the field, none of the participants expressed a desire to become administrators. In fact, Nathan spoke strongly against the idea despite colleagues suggesting it:

> I feel like, um... I'm a voice of reason. Uh, I feel...(laughs), there has been talk about when is Nathan getting his administration degree, to which I have not- I have no desire to be an administrator, but I'm assuming that they're saying that because they see it in me, of the ability to be able to parse things down and look at a bigger picture, and then how does it- how does that apply to me (Nathan Interview 1).

April reflected on her role as a teacher working directly with students, “Like, I'm not here for myself, if this, I'm not here because I want to have a great career that makes lots of money and does whatever. Like, that's not why I'm here. I'm here because I love kids and I want kids to have the best opportunity” (April Interview 1). The findings from this cross case analysis, and the individual case analyses in Chapter 4 will be elaborated on in connection to the extant literature in .

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter aims to discuss how findings from this study may support existing literature and extend future research and practice. This chapter contains suggestions for administrators, teacher preparation programs, school district induction programs, and researchers on the subject of supporting special education teachers who work with students who have intellectual and developmental (dis)abilities (IDD).

Discussion

This study's findings support prior research emphasizing how special education teachers who work with students with IDD engage in a dynamic teaching development process (Holland et al., 1998). As outlined by Holland et al. (1998), people's lived experiences (e.g., history, society, and culture) influence their identity, but their identities continue to evolve as they enact their agency in context. The central claims from each research question are presented in the subsequent sections.

1. How do experienced teachers of students with IDD talk about the ways that their teaching identities have and continue to evolve, including how they view themselves as educators?

Teaching Identity

A teachers' identity is influenced by outside factors (Greenway et al., 2013; Lasky, 2005; Ruppar et al., 2017) and develops across time (a) field experiences, (b) their university preparation, and (c) previous experiences (Horn, Nolen, Ward, and Campbell, 2008). Findings from this study suggest that teacher identity includes high levels of self-efficacy (Dellinger, Bobbett, Olivier, & Ellett, 2008; Keeffe et al., 2010; Urbach et al., 2015), work-life balance (Boe & Cook, 2006; DeMik, 2008; Howell et al. 2005), and effective teamwork (Douglas et al., 2015).

Experienced teachers in this study described how their identities shifted over time based on their experiences engaging in multiple figured worlds (Horn et al., 2008).

Self-efficacy. As teachers develop and construct their teaching identity over time, self-efficacy plays a role in how teachers feel about their ability to successfully perform the job (Bandura, 1977; Dellinger et al., 2008). Their self-efficacy levels are determined by a range of factors, including student performance, student characteristics, behavior, and external factors such as family life, ability level, and previous academic experiences (Dellinger et al., 2008). This study adds to the literature by demonstrating that high levels of teaching self-efficacy directly benefit students. These teachers are more likely to set high standards, adapt curricula, gain parental support and maintain positive attitudes regarding student progress (Urbach et al., 2015). Research indicates that having high self-efficacy levels is critical in preventing burnout (Lee, Patterson, & Vega, 2011; Ruble, Usher, & McGrew, 2011; Sarçam and Sakiz, 2014).

Research shows that experienced teachers in special education embrace and seek new information to continue improving their teaching practices (Ruppar et al., 2015). This study supports findings that experienced special educators are not only open to new ideas, but they often draw on professional networks to problem solve, attend conferences, join professional associations, and stay current with emerging research in the field (Ruppar et al.). Ongoing professional growth indirectly improves students' education and helps teachers learn to meet legal requirements and promote inclusion (Keeffe et al., 2010). Experienced teachers recognize that they must always be asking themselves how to improve their practice (Ruppar et a., 2017), potentially resulting in high expectations for themselves. This study added to these findings when participants described how, as novice teachers, they set unrealistic expectations while engaging in a hero complex. Most participants shared how they shed their hero complex

overtime, adapting a relationship with students that included high expectations and alliances walking alongside their students.

In contrast, as experienced teachers, they set realistic expectations and goals, leading to higher self-efficacy levels. When outside expectations influence this internal process, a teacher may falter in their commitment to the field. Given what the literature tells us about low levels of self-efficacy correlate with high levels of burnout (Ruble et al., 2011), establishing self-efficacy is critical to developing a teaching identity. Findings suggest that it is important for teacher education preparation programs and early career induction programs to explicitly support teachers' self-efficacy development. The general education research literature indicates that teachers seek support and affirmation, or else they experience negative outcomes such as burnout and emotional exhaustion (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2018; Mathews, Rodgers, and Youngs, 2017). Given that special education teachers experience additional isolation in their roles (Bettini et al., 2015; Schlichte et al., 2005), they are possibly at even greater risk of negative emotional outcomes and more studies should be done specifically with special educators.

Furthermore, sometimes administrators, paraprofessionals, or other teachers, hold special education teachers to high expectations despite their novice status (Ruppar et al., 2016). As teachers in this study provided advice to early career teachers, most mentioned how novice teachers must not hold themselves to the same standard as an experienced colleague. Findings from this study suggest that faculty, student teaching mentors, and administrators should help individuals set realistic goals and benchmarks to promote appropriate self-efficacy levels during early career stages. While most teachers in this study demonstrated or explicitly stated having high levels of self-efficacy, one teacher's commitment to the field waned as pressure from a building administrator coupled with paraprofessionals in her classroom led her to feel like she

was not successfully completing her job. These findings support the literature highlighting how teachers' self-efficacy levels should be closely monitored by support staff to prevent burnout and support retention.

Work-life balance and self-care. Teachers in this study discussed or indirectly gave examples of maintaining work-life balance and engaging in self-care. These findings support previous research on the importance of special education teachers maintaining a healthy balance between work tasks and activities in their personal lives (Howell et al., 2005). The teachers in this study shared various strategies to limit classroom time, allowing for only one to two extra service hours beyond the contracted day. Teachers described restricting bringing work home across except during certain times, such as state assessments and IEPs. Limited literature explores how teachers, specifically special education teachers, can actively promote a healthy work-life balance (Schultz et al., 2018). The teachers in this study described how part of their development was accepting that not all tasks could be completed immediately. Therefore, they shared methods for prioritizing tasks, specifically categorizing what needs to be done immediately versus longer-term deadlines.

Balancing work tasks is not enough to cope with job related stressors and prevent feelings of burnout (Berger et al., 2016; Cancio et al., 2018), rather teachers must engage in self-care routines early on in their careers (Bamonti, 2014). For self-care, participants often relied on outside relationships with spouses, family, friends, and church. Limited studies have investigated the role of self-care strategies in the management of job-related stress (Sharp-Donahoo, Siegrist, & Garrett-Wright, 2018). In a study of special education teachers, Sharp-Donahoo et al. (2018) found the use of prayer and mindfulness statistically significant in reducing job stress and compassion fatigue. Borrowing from the social work field, Hick and Furlotte (2009) found

mindfulness combined with social justice approaches allowed social workers to better cultivate awareness of inner and outer experiences. This allowed participants more opportunities to examine how oppressive structures infiltrate their daily lives (Hick et al., 2009). While a handful of articles explore mindfulness for teachers, more needs to be studied about the role self-care plays in improving retention of special education teachers.

Teamwork. This study suggests that experienced teachers make time for self-care while also ensuring that they develop strong collegial relationships – especially with their immediate classroom team, including paraprofessionals. Research from Douglas et al.'s (2015) study also highlighted their participants' overwhelming beliefs that success could only be achieved when working together as a team. One participant explained, "Having team thinking is just key" (Douglas et al., 2015, p. 63). A study by Keeffe et al.'s (2010) demonstrated that participants also valued teamwork highly and even mentioned enjoying the collaboration process of sharing experiences with colleagues and parents. It is important that teachers are given the resources necessary to foster successful relationships with their teams. For example, in this study, teachers indicated there must be time with paraprofessionals outside of when students were present to meet and plan. Teachers also expressed how much they valued team members who resolved conflict within the classroom rather than involving outside administrators. Further research on how teacher preparation programs can better prepare educators for teambuilding is necessary. Researchers, school district administrators, and teacher preparation programs need to better understand the administrators' role in fostering teamwork among their special education teams. For many teachers in this study, a strong team insulated their sense of self-efficacy and a commitment to the field.

Personal Identity

Self-identity is integral to teachers' beliefs and practices, and yet the *personal* identity of special education teachers is rarely recognized by the research (Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006). This study supports claims that a teacher's sense of purpose, self-efficacy, motivation, commitment to the field, and overall effectiveness hinges on the educators' sense of self (Day et al., 2006). Throughout the interviews conducted in this study, teachers explained how their personal and teaching identities were closely related. Exploring the personal identity of teachers provided a wealth of information that was critical for unpacking how teachers arrived at their professional identities and conducted job responsibilities. Teachers did not demonstrate critical thinking around how their power and privilege may contribute to complicity for dominant normative standards that uphold ableism and racism. Only a couple of teachers named these systems throughout the interviews despite being directly asked about their own positionality as it relates to race, gender, and non-(dis)abled identities. Common personal identity factors that were discussed included their experience with individuals who have IDD, having a teacher in the family, and faith.

Previous experience with individuals who have IDD. Several of the teachers had family members or close family friends with a (dis)ability. Although prior experience with individuals who have (dis)abilities lends itself to individuals seeking *helping* professions (Cleveland & Miller, 1977), there is very little research has investigated how having a family member with a (dis)ability influences special education teachers' decisions to join the profession as well as how they interact within the special education figured world (Chambers, 2007; Marks, Matson, & Barraza, 2005). In Chambers's (2007) study, siblings of individuals with (dis)abilities described not always directly entering the field of special education but coming to it through alternative routes. Similarly, teachers in this study often started toward a different field but changed paths to

find their special education careers. Even so, the teacher's original choice was often a helping profession, such as becoming a nurse or physical therapist, as was the case with teachers in this study. The experiences of growing up with individuals who have (dis)abilities should be further explored to identify skills and strategies learned to contribute to the teaching field.

Teaching in the family. This study found that many participants had teachers in their family, specifically special education teachers or paraprofessionals. Growing up with a parent who teaches may indirectly impact an individual, but little is known about this phenomenon from current literature. Based on this study's findings, teachers who have family members in similar fields may have support from these individuals throughout their career stages (e.g., student teaching, university program, early, and then later career). Future research should investigate how having a family member who is a teacher influences current teachers' lives and decisions to join the field.

Faith. Participants in the current study described how their faith was a central component of their identity and influenced their commitment to the field. Research on the role of faith, religion, and spiritual practices of teachers is limited, with only a handful of studies touching on this critical aspect of teachers' personal identities (Harris & Fallot, 2001; Poyner, 2016; Tait, 2008;). However, faith has been identified as a protective factor in the literature. For example, in Tait's (2008) study, one of the most resilient participants cited faith as a substantial protective factor in her personal and professional life. Poyner's (2016) study found that 15 out of 16 participants cited a belief in a higher power as an important protective factor. Harris et al. (2001) recommend that individuals exposed to secondary trauma engage in *spiritual practices* to improve quality of life. During this study, some participants described how the role of their faith in their career decisions, from choosing teaching as a career to maintaining their high

commitment levels to the field. These educators cited viewing teaching as a calling and explained how their faith-based lens influenced their daily decisions when working with students. They also shared how faith helped them cope with stress from the job as well as personal issues. While some may view spirituality as existing outside of science, this does not excuse researchers from excluding a potential piece of evidence that might help better understand teachers' personal identities.

2. How do experienced teachers of students with IDD Express how they navigate factors, such as key relationships and job responsibilities, across ecological systems (e.g., micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems) that uphold dominant systems of oppression

Ecological Systems are Interconnected

The ecological model adapted by Brownell et al. (1993) is used throughout the literature to express the extensive role of special education teachers as they navigate *nested* systems (e.g., micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems; Costa & Norton, 2017). Nested systems situate the teacher in the center of the classroom, then the classroom at the center of the school, and the school resting in the center of the district figured world. Findings from this study suggest the model is *interconnected*, with the classroom, school, and district operating as separate figured worlds that sometimes overlap allowing the teacher limited access to these other settings and experiences. The significance of this finding is that it is important to understand that teachers come from isolation in their classroom where they are often singularly responsible for the overlap across worlds. They navigate interconnected systems as an *other* stepping into a different world throughout their day rather than the Brownell et al. model where they belong at the center of all figured worlds. Encompassing all of these worlds is the macrosystem (Dominant Societal World), which represents possible influences from dominant systems of oppression upholding

racism and ableism. Administrators, general education teachers, and other district representatives should include special education teachers in these separate worlds in ways that promote agency and increase feelings of commitment. Throughout the data related to the navigation between figured worlds, the most prominent themes were teachers' relationships with administrators, evaluation systems, inclusionary practices, and protective factors insulating teachers from burnout.

Relationships with administrators. As teachers navigate the various figured worlds, relationships with administrators cooccurred with many aspects of the participants' jobs and relationships. Their relationship with administrators was one of the greatest outside influences on their teaching commitment levels. Overwhelming evidence suggests that the relationship between special education teachers and administration is a key influence on a teachers' commitment level and impacts their feelings towards other aspects of their job such as teacher evaluation systems, working with paraprofessionals, commitment levels, opportunities for inclusion, and advocacy (Aldosiry, 2020; Bettini, 2016). Having support from administrators can reduce stress and increase teacher job satisfaction resulting in higher commitment levels (Aldosiry, 2020).

Evaluation systems. Special education teachers require evaluation procedures specific to the unique contexts of special education and should be completed by people with special education experience (Jones & Brownell, 2014; Ruppar et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2014). Despite this research, all participants in this study reported having building administrators without special education experience. From the participants, only one teacher described the evaluation process as a useful tool for improving their teaching practice. Meanwhile, all of the other teachers found the evaluation process time consuming and burdensome compounded by the

lack of experience on the part of their evaluators. Feedback from evaluations was perceived as meaningless, especially given the five teachers' extensive experience in this study. This corroborates existing literature that suggests building administrators' need more training in the field of special education to support their teachers (Mathews et al., 2017). Future research is needed on the validity and reliability of teacher evaluation in special education contexts, especially when administrators lack special education knowledge, expertise, and experience.

Inclusion. This study supports previous research findings demonstrating that experienced teachers promote inclusive practices (Douglas et al.'s, 2015; Howell et al., 2005; Ruppar et al., 2014). The findings from this study highlight how special education teaches are responsible for the initiation and success of the inclusion programs within their buildings. This autonomy can also pose challenges for teachers. First, novice teachers are not equipped with skills to navigate complex school systems achieving inclusion opportunities for their students (Mathews, et al. 2017). Teacher preparation programs need to support novice teachers in understanding how goals for inclusion may not align with practices they currently see in the field. Second, for teachers in this study, their schools' inclusion program is only as strong as their experienced special education teacher. If the teachers leave, the inclusion program collapses as it resulted from the individual teacher, without administrative support (Kurth et al., 2014). Lastly, the pressure to initiate and facilitate inclusion may provide teachers additional stressors in their jobs (Mathews, 2017; Ruppar et al., 2014). Teachers must leverage relationships with general education teachers and authority positions within the building to gain access for their students. This research supported Mathews' (2017) findings that the extra efforts towards add to special education teachers' workloads resulting in isolation from general education teachers.

The underlying assumption from the research and further supported by this study is that all experienced teachers are working toward inclusion because it is in students' best interest to learn alongside their typically developing peers (Ruppar et al., 2017). Access to inclusive settings may serve as a cornerstone to breaking down axes of oppression such as ability, race, language, gender, and class differences (Waitoller & Thorius, 2016). To engage in the work of tearing down oppressive systems, teachers may need to reflect on their own position as gatekeepers to inclusive spaces (Siuty, 2019a). Ableism and racism are constructs, with those in power yielding the properties of *smartness* and *whiteness*, perpetuating the phenomenon of "otherness" (Annamma et al., 2013). The divide between classroom and general education worlds is further widened by these factors. Siuty (2019a) explains how a special educator may perpetuate systems of ableism by acting as the person in charge of surveillance and exclusion (Siuty, 2019a, p. 1041). The teachers in Siuty's study reported feeling responsible for the behavior of their students in general education settings, with instances of behavior deemed as problematic resulting in less access to general education spaces. Suity described how school contexts impose this gatekeeper identity on the educators and goes further to suggest that teachers in her study also embraced this identity, countering critical inclusion and upholding deficit understandings of *otherness*. While I agree that school systems of oppression impose this gatekeeper identity on educators, the teachers in this study demonstrated how they accepted this gatekeeper role out of care for their students and the harsh reality that without their efforts student would have no access to spaces with their general education peers. They demonstrated that this additional set of responsibilities was of great concern, and they would rather have district level policies in place to facilitate unfettered access to inclusive spaces.

Future research should not only explore increasing inclusion opportunities, but rather the abolishment of the gap between these two worlds in the first place (Siuty, 2019a). Specifically, future research should explore ways to support special education teachers in their alliances with students, families, and colleagues. By focusing on school district systemwide transformation, administrators can tear down the walls between figured worlds turning efforts from laser focusing on students with (dis)abilities through deficit lenses to deconstructing properties of "normal" wielded by general education teachers and administrators (Siuty, 2019a; Waitoller et al., 2016). *Normalcy* and *whiteness* are damaging constructs that designate certain groups of students as problematic leaving teachers of and students with (dis)abilities isolated.

Protective Factors. The role of teaching has evolved as the rates of children with social, emotional, or mental health concerns have risen (Fleming et al., 2013). The ability to promote resiliency in children is becoming a required competence for all caretakers, including school psychologists, early childhood providers, and teachers (Fleming et al., 2013). As outlined by Flemming et al. (2013) and supported by this study, special education teachers, especially those working with students who have IDD, are required to teach specific social, emotional, behavioral, and adaptive behavioral goals as part of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process when a child qualifies for these area(s). Teachers in this study shared how being responsible for students' emotional well-being can add to the stress teachers already experience, in turn jeopardizing their feelings of resiliency. Without ample protective factors, educators run the risk of experiencing burnout due to chronic exposure to stressors such as large workloads, lack of agency, perceived fairness in the workplace, and a lack of collegiality within the school setting (Fleming et al., 2013). This study points to additional stressors such as the teacher evaluation system, barriers to inclusion, and a lack of special education experience among administrators. In

contrast to these risk factors, protective factors may buffer the effects of stressful events and potentially prevent negative chain reactions associated with given risk situations (Werner et al., 1992). These protective factors may reduce the impact of stress while also increasing self-esteem and efficacy, in turn, opening individuals up to positive opportunities in the future (Werner et al. 2005).

In the past, researchers have paid less attention to the emotional responses of teachers, focusing instead on observable skills and essential character traits (Collins et al., 2017). This may be due to societal beliefs that personality traits are inherent to an individual and cannot change (Day et al., 2006). However, emerging research demonstrates that interventions can increase protective factors within teachers, leading to greater resilience (Berger & Benatov, 2016; Critchley & Gibbs, 2012; Jennings et al., 2017; Stoiber et al., 2011).

Teachers in this study described protective factors that insulated them from feelings of burnout and low commitment levels, such as (a) teachers in their family, (b) family members or friends with IDD, (c) visual reminders of core beliefs throughout the environment, (d) a sense of humor, (e) structure, (f) motherhood, (g) teamwork, (h) high expectations for students, (i) a belief in helping others, (j) work-life balance, (k) self-care practices, (l) hobbies like reading, and (m) faith. Rather than concentrate on the negative factors influencing teacher attrition, future research should promote these protective factors shown to increase resiliency, as demonstrated by teachers in this study. These findings corroborate previous research, which labeled internal protectors as *poly-strengths*, in which an individual exhibits multiple characteristics that are together shown to lessen stress symptoms (Hamby, Grych, & Banyard, 2018). Combinations of strengths included (a) optimistic thinking, (b) religious beliefs, (c) ability to be aware of and regulate emotions, (d) expressing an overall purpose, (e) psychological endurance, and (f)

demonstration of compassion for others (Hamby et al., 2018). The field of education should explore the emotional side of teachers, including their personal identities.

Limitations

Despite the extensive qualitative data that support my findings, there are several limitations of the study. First, I initially planned to interview only teachers working with students who have IDD, but one participant was working with a few adolescents with IDD, but mostly taught in a resource room setting with students who had developmental delays (DD). Every special education program uses different benchmarks to define and organize students by ability, placing them into various programs with different titles. In this case, the teacher's school districts' definition of special education classroom was worded to meet the screening criteria but was unique compared to other teachers. This may have impacted findings because his experience working with high schoolers in a resource room setting might be different than the experience of someone in a self-contained classroom, as his students had more access to inclusion.

Second, most special education teachers identified as white and able-bodied and did not describe how their racial identities mapped on to interactions with students who were multiply marginalized. More research needs to be done to investigate the role that race plays in spaces where children are experiencing multiple systems of oppression and over-represented in special education settings (Annamma et al., 2013) while under-represented in the faces of their teachers. Additionally, researchers, administrators, and teacher preparation programs should explore the experiences of teachers of Color as they navigate school systems that may perpetuate systems of oppression like racism and ableism. My recruiting efforts failed to identify teachers of Color in the field, which may be due to multiple factors including the lack of diversity in the special education teaching profession (LaRon, 2016) and my own approach to recruitment, which may

be influenced by my own relationships, racial identity, and teaching experiences. One participant identified as "mixed" race but did not talk about how their racial identity influenced their teaching. More efforts should be made to include a diverse group of special education teachers in all future research to ensure that their voices are elevated after being silenced by systems of oppression. Together we can work to engage in "meaningful interrogations" of ableism and racism tearing down axis of oppression (Waitoller et al., 2016, p. 381).

Lastly, I did not begin asking questions about the personal identities of participants until the final stage of the research in Interview 3. Future studies should investigate much more about the teacher's personal lives and backgrounds. For example, what were the teachers' experiences in school (elementary through high school), and how did these events shape who they became as teachers? Did they have certain teachers who stuck out as influential? In summary, knowing about their school experiences may have indirectly influenced their decisions to become a teacher later on in life. For individuals who had teachers in the family, much more should also be asked about how those home conversations, work schedules, and stories around the dinner table may have influenced their decisions to teach. Future research should build upon these findings, further exploring the personal identities of special education teachers and how these identities influence (1) their decisions to become teachers, (2) their practices as educators, and (3) their longevity in the field.

Implications

The findings of this study indicate that teachers' identities (both personal and professional) are complex, influenced by external factors, and developed over time. This research provides implications for special education teacher preparation programs, induction programs, and administrators.

Implications for Special Education Teacher Preparation Programs

Special education teacher preparation programs should focus on identity development throughout the coursework given the role it plays in teachers' work experiences and commitment to the field. Specifically, university preparation programs should design programs for pre-service teachers to learn about protective factors and strategies such a self-care and developing work-life balance early in their careers. It is also important that university and student teaching mentors help early career teachers set realistic expectations to ensure they are building self-efficacy and not feeling as though they fall short of impossible goals for a first- or second-year teacher. Teacher preparation programs should prepare students for the eventuality that they may be the sole proprietor of inclusion, as this is the reality most educators will face if we do not shift responsibility back on to administrators at the school and district level (Siuty, 2019a). To do so, teachers may need to reflect on their own power, positionality, and agency while learning ways to disrupt systems of oppression perpetuating ableism (Siuty, 2019a; Siuty, 2019b). Efforts should be made by teacher preparation programs to prepare special education teachers for the role as allies in pushing for broader systems change (Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013; Waitoller et al., 2016). They should be equipped with strategies for building rapport with general education teachers and promoting inclusion for their students while further interrogating why concepts like *normalcy* dictate the placement of students in two different figured worlds – special and general education (Waitoller et al., 2016). Furthermore, special education teacher preparation programs need to leverage experienced teachers in the field, ensuring students find mentor teachers to help guide them through teacher identity development.

Implications for District Induction Programs

Experienced special education teachers express feelings of isolation and a lack of agency when administrators have little to no special education experience. School districts should leverage their experienced special education teachers to mentor and support incoming professionals through mentorship programs. Early career teachers would benefit from their colleagues' expert advice, especially when administrators cannot provide context-specific feedback to improve teaching practice and identity development. Induction mentorship programs should be required as they not only benefit the mentee, but the mentor's leadership role may lead to enhanced feelings of agency and self-efficacy. It is important to note that mentorship opportunities should not be an extra burden, but administrators should ensure that expert teachers receive substitute support and reduced hours or enhanced pay to ensure the program does not contribute to burnout but enhances leadership opportunities.

Implications for Administrators

Administrators should learn to support their special education teachers through building rapport and understanding. Having an administrator with no or limited special education experience is frustrating for teachers and can lead to a deteriorating commitment to the school building and potentially the profession. School districts and administrator preparation programs should make efforts to better train their administrators on special education teacher responsibilities, skillsets, and identity. When conducting evaluations, administrators should bring in expert teachers in the field to provide a beneficial experience for teachers who, in the context of this study, found the evaluation process time consuming and burdensome.

Collaborating with Paraprofessional

In working with paraprofessionals, administrators should support teachers in building collaborative teams within and outside of their classrooms through team meetings, professional

development trainings, and conflict resolution tool building sessions. Working with paraprofessionals is a challenging undertaking and administrators should look for ways to foster paraprofessional-teacher relationships by providing paraprofessionals time to meet with teachers when students are not present. Administrators should also encourage conflict resolution within the classroom and provide teachers with tools to serve as leaders of their classroom teams, thus supporting their agency and increasing feelings of commitment and job satisfaction.

Agency – Learning from Teachers

Administrators should be provided with opportunities to learn about supporting their special education teachers, and the possible benefits of supporting teachers' agency, honoring the teachers' experience and backgrounds. Administrators could spend small amounts of time visiting special education classrooms and learning from special education teachers to advance their own knowledge of the field while districts could provide trainings and other resources for administrators to better understand the roles and responsibilities of their special educators. This act would create a sense of agency for special education teachers while adding to their identity as leaders not just within their classroom figured world, but the school world as a whole. It would also allow the administrator more perspective about their schools' special education programs, especially regarding the inclusion of special education students in general education settings.

Supporting Inclusion

The special education teachers in this study were all required to be the sole proprietor of inclusion for their buildings, acting as gatekeepers for inclusive spaces (Siuty, 2019a). This creates excess responsibility and stress for teachers while allowing for an unstable inclusion program that only exists as long as an experienced teacher can manage relationships with general education staff (Kurth et al., 2014). University preparation programs and administrators should

further support inclusion efforts by dismantling systems of oppression that divide spaces into those where students may not be allowed access based on ableist and racist dominant normative standards (Siuty, 2019a). During pre-service training, barriers between general and special education teachers should be eliminated at the teacher preparation program level allowing *all* educators to learn in the same spaces. Once in the job, administrators should leverage their access to systematic power differentials to prevent the prevalent *otherness* plaguing school districts by eliminating barriers to inclusion and positioning general and special education teachers as allies for *all* students (Siuty, 2019a).

Conclusion

This research was unique in that I flipped the deficit lens, focusing on the retention of special education teachers rather than attrition, which has received considerable attention in the literature. The majority of the research literature is focused on why special education teachers leave, rather than attending to the plethora of protective factors promoting resiliency among special education teachers. Future research should explore interventions designed to promote protective factors and support teacher identity development throughout career stages. Similarly, researchers should study administrators successfully working with special education teachers to learn how they provide support to teachers and promote teacher agency. The field would benefit from learning more about how successful models of administrator support and involvement in special education and schoolwide efforts towards inclusion.

Every year students with IDD lose highly qualified teachers (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2008), which puts them at risk for poor outcomes (Reid et al., 2006). Meanwhile, teachers leaving the field find themselves experiencing the ill effects of burnout coupled with stress related to changing careers. For years, research has focused on the many ways the education

system fails students and teachers. With eyes turned towards the broken, we can never hope to mend what is not working. Using a strengths-based perspective, researchers, school district administrators, and teacher preparation programs should instead focus on the strengths of teachers who are successfully remaining committed to the field of special education despite all the challenges surrounding the job. Likewise, this research should be expanded to better understand the role and experiences of administrators who successfully support special education teachers and schoolwide inclusion. By adopting strengths-based methodology, we can move toward better futures for students with IDD and their teachers.

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APPENDIX A:

Initial Screener for Special Education Teacher Selection

Teacher Name:
School:
Location (city, state):

Please note that I use the intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) to indicate students with moderate to severe disabilities as categorized by their diagnosis.

1. How many years have you been teaching students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD)?
2. How many students do you teach with IDD?
3. Do you engage in advocacy for students? If so, what does that look like?
4. Describe what a typical academic or systematic instruction period looks like in your class?
5. Do you individualize or adapt curriculum for students? If so, please provide an example.
6. Tell me about your relationships with colleagues in and outside of your building.
7. What types of expectations do you have for students in your class?
8. What outcomes do you expect for these students?
9. On a scale of 1-10, how much faith and trust do you have in the parents of students in your class (1 being none, and 10 being the most)? And Why?
10. When something goes wrong in your classroom, how do you respond?
11. How do you improve your practice (e.g. books, conferences, trainings, professional learning communities, etc.)
12. Describe how you feel that students in your class may or may not be multiply marginalized based on (dis)ability, race, and socioeconomic status.
13. What actions do you take to ensure that students have a sense of belonging?
14. How do you empower the students in your class?

Thank you for your time!

Sincerely,

Autumn Eyre

APPENDIX B

Keys for Initial Screener for Special Education Teacher Selection

Determining Expert IDD Teacher Skills and Qualities

Question	Question Measurement Purpose	Example Response	Non-Example Response
How many years have you been teaching students with low-incidence (dis)abilities?	Demographic	5 or more years	4 or fewer years
How many students do you teach with intellectual and developmental disabilities?	Demographic	3 or more students with IDD	2 or fewer students with IDD
Do you engage in advocacy for students? If so, what does that look like?	Advocacy	"Yes, I'm often advocating for student's needs with the help of building and district administrators, as well as parents."	"I constantly battle with my principal around things that my students don't get. I'm sick and tired of general education students getting more opportunities than mine"
Describe what a typical academic or systematic instruction period looks like in your class?	Systematic and academic instruction	"Most of our day is focused on systematic instruction. Typically, we are doing rotations with myself leading reading, one of the aids teaching math, and another aid providing writing instruction. Students rotate through each station every 15 minutes."	"We don't have a lot of time for academic instruction. I'm often working one-to-one with students while the rest of the class is doing free-choice."
Do you individualize or adapt curriculum for students? If so, please provide an example.	Individualizing and adapting curriculum	"The teaching aids in my class and I work together to adapt the general education curriculum whenever possible. For example, one of the students in my class is attending general education for technology. We	"I don't have a lot of time to adapt curriculum. I do my best, but I often have to send a teaching aid to the child's class to help them do the work."

		work on typing in my class to improve his skillset and we have found him an adaptive keyboard that helps him in general education setting.”	
Tell me about your relationships with colleagues in and outside of your building.	Collegial relationships	“I have a great relationship with my colleagues in the building and across the district. I just went to a first-grade teachers’ baby shower. It’s way easier to find inclusion opportunities for students, such as getting access to field trips if you’re friends with everyone.”	“I only talk to the other special education teachers in the district. I don’t relate to general education teachers in my building as they often exclude my students”
What types of expectations do you have for your students?	High expectations	“I have high expectations for students and teach them the skills they need to meet these expectations” “Students in my class are capable of achieving high benchmarks” “I work with general education teachers to set expectations for students with IDD that will allow for more inclusion opportunities”	“My students do their best and that’s good enough for me” “My students need more love and attention than academic instructions” “I hope my students will improve from when they entered my class. There are a lot of barriers to inclusion, so I sometimes have to lower expectations.”
What outcomes do you expect for your students?	Positivity	“All of students in my class will be successful whether they leave school prepared to enter the job market or even attend college.”	“I’m not sure what my student outcomes will be, but they have a lot of barriers to face”
On a scale of 1-10, how much faith and trust do you have in the parents of your students (1 being none, and 10 being the most)? And Why?	Positivity	“10 – the parents are the experts on their child, and they help me understand what challenges they face at home as well as strategies for best helping their child in my class. It’s a constant back and forth.”	“4 – My parents don’t seem to care about their students because they are always working and never make time to come in to meet with me”
When something goes wrong in	Flexibility and creativity	“I always find a way to work through challenges. I will ask	“Things often go wrong and it’s very frustrating. I go to

your classroom, how do you respond?		my colleagues or search online for potential solutions. Things don't always go as planned but it's my job to work through this. Oftentimes when something doesn't go right, the solution ends up being better than if my original plan had worked."	my principal's office but if she doesn't listen then I give up. I'm looking for a better school with more support in the future."
How do you improve your practice (e.g. books, conferences, trainings, professional learning communities, etc.)	Focus on continual improvement	"I regularly attend professional development opportunities. I also attend conferences as I'm an active member of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). I also read books during the summer on improving my practice."	"I don't have time for professional development. I'm working too much."

Determining a Critically Inclusive Lens

Question	Question Measurement Purpose	Example Response	Non-Example Response
Describe how you feel that students in your class may or may not be multiply marginalized based on (dis)ability, race, and socioeconomic status.	Recognition of elements of exclusion	"The students I work with face discrimination on a daily basis due to their race and being from a poor family. Having a disability makes this worse. I'm trying to learn more about how to help work alongside these students to push against dominant normative standards which perpetuate racism and ableism."	"My students with disabilities are also children of Color but I don't think that matters much."
What actions do you take to ensure that students have a sense of belonging?	Demonstration of understanding inclusive elements	"The students in my classroom belong with their general education peers and their homeroom teachers refer to these students as 'our' kids. They have friends in this class as well as in their special	"I gave up having my students included a long time ago. We mostly stick to ourselves [in their self-contained setting] because we aren't wanted"

	education room. These students are part of the school environment."	
How do you empower the students in your class?	"Every day I work to help my students advocate for their own needs and wants no matter what settings they are in. I also ensure that they see themselves in literature and posters on the walls such as ensuring they read books with individuals who have (dis)abilities and children of Color as main characters."	"Nothing makes me happier than saving a student from a hard situation. It's my role to take care of the student and protect them from harm."

APPENDIX C

Semi-structured Interview 1 Protocol:

Understanding Teaching Identity and Context

1. An individuals' identity is not static, rather it is a dynamic process that changes over time. How do you define your teacher identity?
2. How do you feel that others define you as a teacher? (*probe: teachers in the building, parents, administrators, parents, the media, etc.)*
3. Think back to your identity when you first started teaching. How did experiences in your teacher preparation program shape your identity from what it was then to now?
4. How have experiences in your early career shaped your identity?
5. In what ways have you experienced exclusion as a teacher of students with IDD?
6. Tell me about your role as someone who manages IEPs and paraprofessionals.
7. Have you ever co-taught with a general education teacher?
    a. If yes: describe this experience for the students you worked with and yourself.
    b. If no: Would you like the opportunity to co-teach with a general education teacher?
8. Sometimes teachers experience agency which is the process that allows you to influence your own situation. Please share examples of times you felt a strong sense of agency in regard to the students you teach.
9. In contrast to agency, teachers may experience vulnerability or feelings of a lack of control. Provide examples of times when you felt vulnerable in your role as a teacher.
10. Imagine that your teaching career is a large cake. What percentage of the cake would be agency and what percentage would be vulnerability or lack of control.

11. How has this changed over time?
12. In what ways does your identity – either race, socioeconomic status, gender, or being able-bodied - played a role in the work you do with students who are may be multiply marginalized?
13. Many teachers find themselves advocating *for* students with IDD. Tell me about ways in which you work with solidarity *alongside* students with (dis)abilities.
14. Teachers may experience tension from the different settings in which they reside. For example, in the beginning of a teachers' career, they might have tension between their university program, their own perceptions of what it is to be a teacher, and then the real-world situations they experience in student teaching settings. Describe a time when you felt tensions between these settings.
15. How did you resolve these conflicting experiences?
16. In what ways do you feel that your teaching identity contribute to your commitment to the field of special education?
17. Why do you think that other teachers leave the field?
18. Is there anything else you would like to share that I haven't asked? Or do you have any questions for me?

APPENDIX D

Semi-structured Interview 2 Protocol:

External Factors Influencing Teacher Identity

As a special education teacher, you may experience support or pressure from outside sources which may or may not influence your teaching identity.

1. Describe your school climate as it pertains to adults within the building.
2. Tell me about ways that school climate may have influenced your teaching identity.
3. Tell me about your relationships with colleagues in and outside of the building.
    a. How many of your colleague's cell phone numbers do you have?
    b. Do you go to school social events? If so, what does your participation look like?
4. In what ways do these relationships influence your teaching identity?
5. What do you think are dominant societal views of (dis)ability?
    a. If the participant gives conflicting/multiple perspectives (e.g. Society sees kids as capable; others see them as not capable), ask "What percentage think X and what percentage think Y?"
6. How have these dominant societal views influenced who you are as a teacher?

Microsystem

7. When you became a teacher, describe ways in which your role differed from what you may have expected. How has this changed over time?

Mesosystem

8. Share examples of support you receive from:
    a. Administrators
    b. General education colleagues
    c. Parents

Exosystem

9. What are the types of professional development (PD) opportunities in your district?
10. Which teacher evaluation system do you use? Share with me about this process.
11. How much knowledge of special education does your evaluator have?
12. Does your teacher evaluation (the process or scores) influence how you feel about yourself as an educator?
13. In what ways do you balance paperwork such as IEPs, BIPs, and so on? If a participant mentions that they leave work at school, then ask:
    a. How do you draw that line? The line of what HAS to get done and what can be done later? In other words, if you're not taking work home and something doesn't get done, what happens?
    b. If you were mentoring a first-year teacher about balancing their work/life balance, what would you tell them? Imagine they argue that they have to get it "all" done, what would you say, then?
14. Tell me more about your position within the context of the school.
    a. How often are students with IDD included in general education?
    b. Whose responsibility is it to support inclusion?
    c. If you could change one thing about inclusive practices in your school or district, what would it be?

Imagine yourself during your first year of teaching. Given what you've shared about how you navigate the outside pressures of the job, what would you tell your former self?

APPENDIX E

Personal Factors Influencing Teaching Identity

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being completely separate and 10 being completely together, where would you say your teacher identity and personal identity fall? Are they 1, not together at all, or 10 completely intertwined?

Macrosystem

2. How do you feel the district views students with IDD?
   a. What would you want them to think?
3. Suppose we created a character named, Mrs. X, whose beliefs about special education teachers reflected the majority of administrators and policy makers. What does Mrs. X say about special education teachers?

Previous Experiences with Individuals Who Have IDD

4. What were your experiences with individuals who have (dis)abilities from childhood through adolescence?
   a. If they talk about family members also ask, "What about outside your family?" How did these within family and outside family experiences contrast?
   b. How do your experiences map on to your teacher identity?
   c. How do these experiences influence your day to day teaching?

   If they reply "I haven't had any" then ask: Do you think your lack of experience with individuals who have (dis)abilities has played a role in your teaching identity development?

Personal Factors

5. What did you want to be when you were growing up?

6. Do you see any connections from what you wanted to be to your current teaching career?
7. Do you think that this maps on to your current teaching identity?
8. What was your undergraduate degree?
9. Describe for me the process you went through to become a teacher, starting from the moment you made the decision to teach.
10. Who were the people that supported you or aided you through this process?
11. Do you interact with these same individuals today?
12. Who gives you the most support that directly influences your ability to remain committed to the field of education?
13. Given a school has 180 days, how many of the 180 did you think about leaving? How many your first year of teaching?
14. When you experienced challenges in your personal life, how do you navigate these challenges? You do not have to disclose personal hardships, but in general, how do you navigate challenges outside of school? How has that changed over time?
15. Do you have a faith or practice spirituality? If so, does this influence who you are as a teacher? What about your commitment to stay committed to the field?
16. Throughout our first two interviews, there have been moments you shared where you faced challenges and may have thought about leaving the field or your building.
    a. I want you to pretend that your best friend is a teacher who is leaving this career and/or their school building. What would he/she say to me right now?
    b. Now pretend that your other friend is staying, what would he/she say?

If you could tell every new special education teacher 1-3 things, what would they be?

APPENDIX F

Artifact Prompts 1 & 2

Artifact 1 prompt: Choose an artifact that best demonstrates your teacher identity.

Artifact 2 prompt: Choose an artifact that best represents your personal identity.

Please select a form of artifact that is most motivating you. Here are some possible options:

Journal entry	Picture	Email from a parent or adminstrator	Collage	Video log or audio recording
Drawing/Sketch	Mind map	Student work	Evidence used in evaluation or National Boards	Poem

APPENDIX G

Relationship of Data Sources to Research Questions

Overarching Research Question: How do experienced teachers of students with ID **Research Question – Part 1:** Describe how their teaching identities have and continue to evolve	
Data Source	***Purpose***
Interviews 1 & 2, Artifacts 1	Examine various components that influence teacher identity
Interview 1	Explore interactions between figurative worlds identified by teachers and their impact on identity development
Interview 1	Ask questions about how feelings of agency, vulnerability, and authority influence teacher identity
Artifacts 1 & 2	Look for evidence of identity through the teachers' interactions with their professional and personal figured worlds.
Interview 3	Ask questions about how personal identity may influence teaching identity and how these identities interact and shift over time
Interview 3	Explore teachers' experiences with individuals who have IDD prior to becoming a teacher
Interview 3	Identify key people in their life who have supported the teachers, especially other teachers in the family
Research Question – Part 2: Navigate factors such as key relationships and job responsibilities, across ecological systems (e.g. micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems)	
Data Source	***Purpose***
Interview 1	Ask questions about how identity developed over time and the factors influencing this dynamic process
Interview 2	Learn about the perceptions of special educators around historical attrition factors across ecological systems (e.g., macro-, exo-, meso-, and microsystems)
Interviews 1& 2	Examine perceptions around students who may be multiply marginalized

APPENDIX H

Teacher Participation Consent Form

Special Education Teachers Working with Students Who Have IDD Investigator:

Autumn Eyre, M.A.T., BCBA
Doctoral Candidate
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Faculty Advisor:

Carly Roberts, Ph.D.
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Investigator's Statement

I am asking you to be in a research study. 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 and go over the form with you in person.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to better understand why and how experienced special education teachers of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) develop strong identities, which serve as protective factors in maintaining longevity in the field.

PROCEDURES

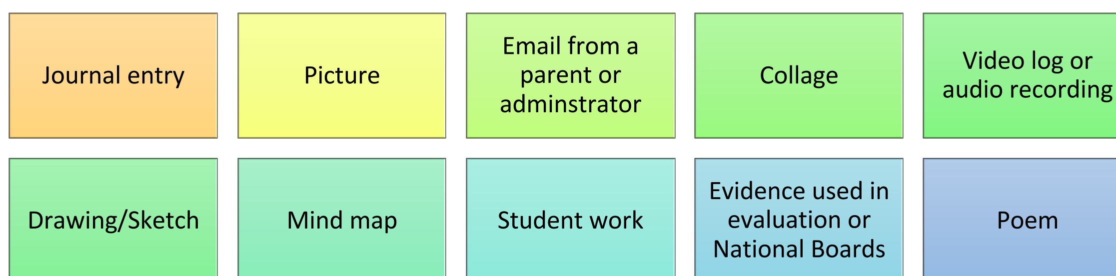
If you choose to be in this study, I would like to conduct two to three interviews that may be 40-60 minutes in length. Here are a couple examples of the questions that I might ask:

- *Describe how your classroom context, including students and paraprofessionals, influenced your teaching identity.*
- *Sometimes teachers experience agency, which is the process that allows you to influence your own situation. Please share examples of times you felt a strong sense of agency in regard to the students you teach.*

I will be exploring the how you developed your teaching identity over time. I will also be asking questions about your experience working with students who may be multiply marginalized based on their ability, social economic status, and race.

With your permission, I would like to record your interviews using audio or video so that I can have an accurate record of our conversation. I will transcribe this recording without identifiable information (e.g. names, schools, etc.) 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.

Also, I would like to review two to three artifacts that you would be willing to share which illustrate your critically inclusive lens such as an inclusive practice you would like to describe, a letter from a principal, a product from a student, and so on. Here is a visual that shows the multiple ways that you could provide this information.



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. Also, some people feel self-conscious when notes are taken or interviews are recorded. There might be times where questions elicit emotional responses. At any point, we can stop the process if it becomes too difficult for you as a participant.

BENEFITS OF THE STUDY

You may not directly benefit from taking part in this research study. However, one benefit of this study is to inform interested parties (e.g. administrators, teacher preparation programs, and policymakers) on the wonderful work you are doing as an educator and contributing factors to your retention. I hope to inform researchers' understanding as to why and how experienced special education teachers of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) develop strong identities, which serve as protective factors in maintaining longevity in the field. I also desire to demonstrate how teachers are counteracting historically oppressive, deficit minded narratives about their roles and their students by understanding how these teachers work *in solidarity* with their students, as opposed to *on behalf of* their students.

FINDINGS

During the study, I will conduct "member checks" which refers to showing you information I have interpreted from interviews or artifacts. I will ask you to read the information and let me know if I have accurately represented your voice. You will have the option to review findings when I have finished the paper or not, based on your availability and desire to do so.

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.

Government or university staff sometimes review studies such as this one to make sure they are being done safely and legally. If a review of this study takes place, your records may be examined. The reviewers will protect your privacy. The study records will not be used to put you at legal risk of harm.

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 to any future research opportunities.

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact Autumn Eyre at 206.227.0619 or eyrea@uw.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the University of Washington Human Subjects Division at (206) 543-0098.

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Signature of investigator Printed Name Date

Participant's statement

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 call the Human Subjects Division at (206) 543-0098. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

____ I give permission for this researcher to videotape or audio record my interview.
____ I do NOT give my permission for the researcher to videotape or audio record 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