FORMER STUDENTS, CURRENT PARENTS: EXPLORING IDENTITY SENSEMAKING PROCESSES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

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by
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

FORMER STUDENTS, CURRENT PARENTS:
EXPLORING IDENTITY SENSEMAKING PROCESSES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

presented by Tracey Kenyon Milarsky,

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and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATION

To J.B., John, Keisha, Maureen and Tiffany who generously shared their stories in the hopes that talking about their experiences would help create positive changes for their children and for all students identified with educational disabilities. It was an honor to participate in this process with you all.

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Table of Contents

Appendices

Tables

Figures

Abstract

Former Students, Current Parents: Exploring Identity Sensemaking Processes in Special Education. Tracey Kenyon Milarsky, 2024: Dissertation, University of Missouri – Columbia

Keywords: identity, disability identity, qualitative

This dissertation, Former Students, Current Parents; Exploring Identity Sensemaking Processes in Special Education, was written by Milarsky, Tracey Kenyon, in 2024.

This qualitative study explores how five adults, former special education students who now parent children in similar special education classrooms engage in identity sensemaking. The research purpose of this study is to explore how these adults, now parents of children identified with educational disabilities, make sense of their special education experiences as former students and current parents. Using discursive-narrative methods, the stories and talk from online Story Circle, small group, and individual interview sessions are analyzed by using Gee's identity analysis (2000) and De Fina's level 3 positioning (2013) analytic frameworks. These analyses focus on how identity is recognized and positioned in conversation with dominant narratives about educational disability. The results of these analyses show the prevalence of stigmatizing silences related to disability. Links to dominant narratives found in these participants' narrated experiences also reveal how silences were interrupted by messages that specialized instruction related to identified educational disability could be escaped or overcome and that the experience of being in special education was marked with messages that disability identity was situated within a stigmatized hierarchy of dis/ability. Each participant made sense of their experiences as students in ways that involved combinations of accepting, rejecting and complicating dominant messages about what it means to be the kind of student who is in special education. All recognized their unique positioning to intentionally model what it is like to be the kind of person identified as needing special education for their children. These participants valued the opportunity to disrupt stigmatizing silences connected to this identity. This study offers valuable insights for special education, including potential future directions for the field to increase work focused on understanding the lived experiences of students identified with educational disabilities.

Chapter 1: Introduction

While research on identity representation in schools has increased in recent decades, there is limited understanding of the identity sensemaking processes of students with educational disabilities. To adequately address the complexities and nuances associated with educational disability sensemaking in special education, the perspectives of those with the lived experience of being in special education classes must be the focus. Drawing from social constructionist interactionist identity theories (Bamberg et al., 2011; Gee, 2012), this qualitative study investigates identity sensemaking processes in special education using discursive narrative practices (De Fina, 2013; Gee, 2000). This study uses narrative research methods to amplify experiences of those “most often invisible, silent, composed, and lived on the margins” (Huber et al., 2013).

After providing background to establish the importance of this research, the research questions that guided the data collection and analysis will set the stage for the rest of the dissertation. Definitions useful for understanding the context of the study are provided. The chapter concludes by addressing relevant assumptions, delimitations, and limitations of the dissertation study.

This chapter is followed by a review of the social identity theoretical frameworks that allow exploration of a study encompassing disability, identity, and disability identity. These frameworks work in conversation to establish a foundation for the dissertation study. Next, the research methods used are explained and justified, as they draw upon narrative practice methods grounded in social identity frameworks that conceptualize educational disability as a social identity that engages in a dialectic with dominant narratives about disability. These processes of recognition and positioning will be described in the chapters dedicated to exploring the results of the identity and positioning analysis, while these results will be discussed in the context of implications for research and practice and future directions for inquiry into educational disability identity sensemaking. The results and discussion of the analysis of participant narratives position identities associated with special education within social hierarchies, while also acknowledging the potential power of identity resources. Future special education research focused on providing identity resources may enable the recognition of disability as a nameable individual and group identity within the context of special education settings.

To acknowledge diverse perspectives within the broad and heterogeneous disability community, this dissertation was written using both person-first and identity-first language (APA, 2020). This recognizes that individuals may have different personal and political reasons for identifying with specific forms of language (Andrews et al., 2019; Dunn & Andrews, 2015).

The basic assumption in qualitative research is that there are multiplicities of truth experienced in the lives of participants; this requires qualitative methods studying these lived experiences to be contextual, constructed, and open to interpretation (Bhattacharya, 2017). In qualitative research, the researcher is regarded as the primary instrument (Brantlinger, et al., 2005; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Making efforts to make subjectivity transparent at every stage of research is vital for trustworthy research using qualitative methods (Bhattacharya, 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Using first-person pronouns is needed for precise attribution in written research, as indicated by the 7th edition of the

American Psychological Association (APA) manual, Section 3.09 (2020). The APA manual recommends replacing third-person pronouns with personal ones to avoid passive voice and promote precision in attributing actions (APA 7, 2020). For example, stating "I reviewed the data" instead of "The data were reviewed" strengthens clarity and underscores the role of the researcher (APA 7, 2020; p. 69). To this end, this dissertation integrates first-person pronouns to not only promote clarity and active engagement with research findings but also to reinforce the pivotal role of the researcher as the primary research instrument.

Background

In the language of Congress expanding 1975's Education of All Handicapped Children Act to 1990's Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act stating that "Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society" (1400, C;1). The implementation of IDEA, including working definitions of concepts such as free and appropriate public education and least restrictive environment, is an ongoing work in progress (Yell et al., 2022). However, the basic right for all students to receive public education—the premise of zero reject principle--continues to serve as the foundation of special education research and inquiry as it expands the ideas of access and inclusion toward considerations of identity (Bruner, 2005). 15 percent of public students from ages 3 to 21 receive special education services under IDEA (NCES, 2023). Schools influence the process of identity formation through curricular and pedagogical choices (Mueller, 2021). These choices influence how students form ideas about disability, remaining silent—or silencing—

messages about the kind of person who is identified as having a disability (Mueller, 2019).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative narrative discursive study is to explore the identity sensemaking processes of adults in the United States who were in special education classrooms during their time in public school and who are now parenting children with similar special education experiences. Research related to the importance of the intersections of identity in education is growing (Crenshaw, 2016; Crenshaw et al., 1989; Hernández & Darling-Hammond, 2022; McCarthy & Crichlow, 1993; Oyserman & Dawson, 2021). However, understanding how students identified with educational disabilities make sense of their identities is less explored (Bacon & Lalvani, 2019; Forber-Pratt et al., 2021, Mueller, 2021; Smith & Mueller, 2022). A notable gap in existing educational disability identity research is the perspective of adult family members who share similar experiences with their children identified as requiring specialized instruction in special education classrooms.

Importance of the Study

This study contributes to the fields of special education, narrative research, and positioning analysis by exploring the perspectives of former students who have personal experience with special education and who have children also identified with educational disabilities. It addresses a gap in the literature by examining how educational disability identities are constructed and negotiated within special education contexts. The study aims to explore the unique experiences of these adults as former students and current parents with special education classroom experiences. The findings could influence educational practices and policies to enhance identity representation for students with disabilities and aid families in providing identity resources that aid identity sensemaking.

Connections to the Purpose of the Study

This study explores identity sensemaking within the social context of special education, aiming to understand how connections to educational disability are recognized and positioned. By using a theoretical framework that combines qualitative methods based on discursive (Gee, 2000) and narrative practices (Bamberg, 2004b; De Fina, 2013; Giaxplou & Georgakopolou, 2021), this study explores the process of navigating socio-historical identity messages to make sense of educational disability identity in special education. This study uses a social identity lens that views identity as “the 'kind of person’ one is recognized as being at a given time and place” (Gee, 2000; p. 99.) This conception of identity is less a static position but a “constantly shifting process of positioning” (Hill Collins, 2017; p. 16). A processual view of identity that dynamically places the kind of person one is recognized as being in a given time and place within structures that make recognized identities “the consequence and vehicle for vulnerability” (Crenshaw, 2016). By synthesizing empirical and theoretical research, this study engages with ideas related to the potential of disability as a valued identity in special education. It serves as a springboard for addressing research gaps and proposing future directions for research and practice focusing on the perspectives of students identified with educational disabilities.

Addressing the Research Gap

The study explores the experiences of adults who attended special education classes as students are now parents of students with identified educational disabilities.

This exploration contributes to the understanding of how individuals in special education navigate identity messages related to being in special education for themselves and their children. These adults describe past experiences as special education students as well as how they provide identity resources to their children related to their shared experiences. By amplifying these lived experiences, this study seeks to promote social change and challenge systemic injustices by interrupting silences related to disability identity sensemaking within special education. These research questions ask:

1. How are identities recognized in the stories and talk of adults who were in special education classes and are now parents of children identified with educational disabilities?
2. How do these adults accept, counter, or complicate dominant narratives through a process of positioning their identity as the kind of person who was in special education classes and is now parenting children identified with educational disabilities?

Definitions of the following terms are useful for understanding the contexts and methods necessary to conduct this study based on the preceding questions:

Definitions of Terms

Disability identity: “a sense of self that includes one’s disability and feelings of connection to, or solidarity with, the disability community” (Dunn & Burcaw, 2013, p. 148).

Dominant narratives: Messages containing assumptions about what is commonly understood about an identity and how an identity fits within expectations of normal, typical, or expected; these messages are social and historicized meaning that their content is not isolated but rather embedded within broader social and historical contexts, which shape their meaning and interpretation. (Bamberg & Wipf, 2021)

Educational disability (Individuals of Disabilities in Education Act [IDEA]: Deficits identified as intellectual disability, hearing impairment (including deafness), a speech or language impairment, a visual impairment (including blindness), a serious emotional disturbance (referred to as emotional disturbance), an orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, an other health impairment, a specific learning disability, deaf-blindness or multiple disabilities; that impact ability of students to access the regular education curriculum and requires specialized instruction (IDEA 2004).

Identity: "The 'kind of person' one is recognized as being at a given time and place" (Gee, 2000; p. 99)

Identity agents: Important adults who intentionally facilitate positive identity formation with children and adolescents to detect, interrogate, mediate, and potentially interrupt broader sociocultural influences on the formation of identity are powerful identity resources (Schachter & Ventura, 2008)

Identity resources: Messages, experiences, and relationships related to identity that aid, counter, or complicate constructions of a salient identity (Gee, 2000; Mueller, 2020).

Identity sensemaking: Process of recognizing what it means to be a certain kind of person (Gee, 2000; p. 113) through an ongoing positioning process of dialectic engagement (Bamberg, 2004a) with dominant narratives meant to continually answer the question of "Who am I?" within dynamic contexts (De Fina, 2013).

Assumptions, Delimitations & Limitations

This study assumes that adults who grew up attending special education classes for at least one year and now have children in similar classes offer unique insights into identity sensemaking in special education for special education research and practice. Qualitative methods situated within social identity theoretical frameworks and the use of identity and positioning analysis are assumed to be suitable for exploring participants' narrated experiences. Assumptions were made that the field of special education research and practice finds the experiences of former students who are currently parenting students who receive specialized instruction in special education classrooms to be useful for future research and practice. These assumptions of usefulness connect to future directions in special education research for studies related to students identified with educational disabilities right to belong (Kuttner, 2023) and best practices related to constructing components of foundational self-determination including knowledge about disability (Burke et al., 2020; Palmer et al, 2017).

Participants' willingness to engage in the research process is presumed while considering the sensitive nature of sharing stories related to being former students and current parents with special education experiences. Specifically targeting adults who spent at least one year in special education classes and are parenting children also in special education, the study excludes other populations. Recruitment was limited to online purposive sampling, potentially favoring technologically savvy individuals.

Recognizing the challenges in recruiting individuals with this specific identity experience, efforts were made to address them through purposive (Creswell & Poth, 2018) online recruitment and data collection methods. However, power differentials, including access to reliable technology, are acknowledged as potential barriers. The study's focus on identity sensemaking processes in special education means other factors influencing identity formation were not the focus of the analysis. These assumptions, delimitations, and limitations provide insight into the study's scope and potential challenges while acknowledging the specific focus on identity sensemaking by individuals identified with educational disabilities within the context of special education.

Summary

This qualitative study draws from social constructionist interactionist identity theories to explore identity sensemaking processes in special education through discursive narrative practices to provide a nuanced understanding of the dynamic nature of identity sensemaking for students identified with educational disabilities. This study focuses on exploring experiences necessary to promote positive identity recognition and positioning opportunities for students and families in special education. The contexts for this exploration can be found in the following theoretical framework.

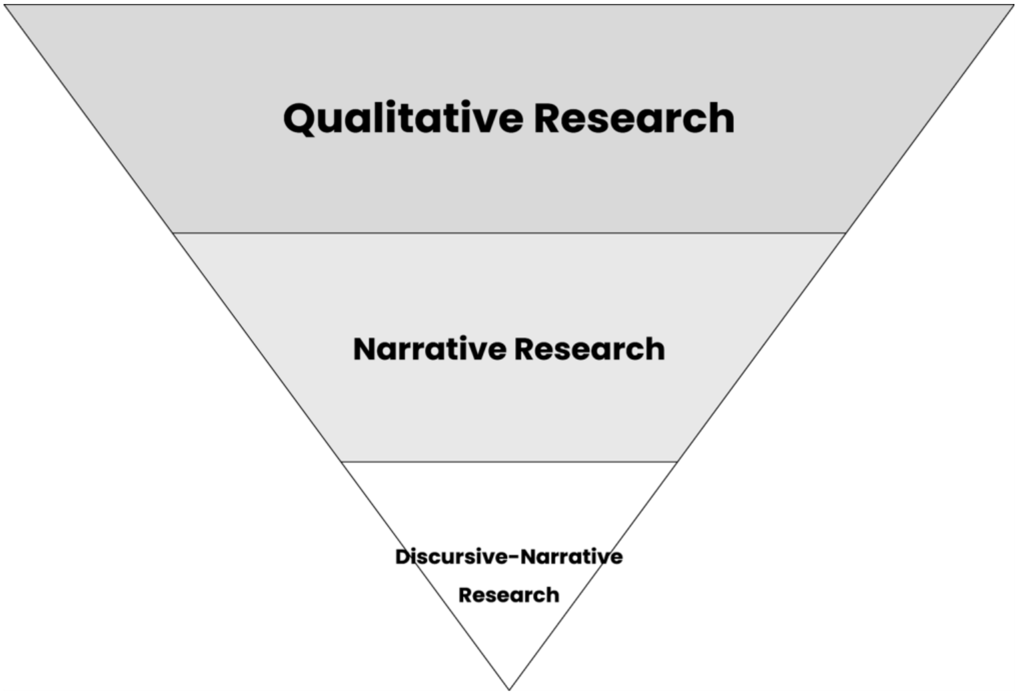
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

This study explores lived experiences through narratives within a paradigmatic framework that integrates social constructivism and interactionism (Bamberg, 2014; Blumer, 1969; Hogg et al., 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000). Situated within a social constructivist-interactionist framework (Bamberg, 2014; De Fina, 2013; Gee, 2012; Goffman, 1963; Weick, 1995) narrative exploration views identity through a discursive-constructionist lens (Bamberg, 2011; Gee, 2000). This framework enables an understanding of identity as a continually co-constructed process of becoming, shaped by social interactions that are influenced by, and influence, language use (Bamberg, 2014). Within this framing, identity is seen as something that is not essentially located internally or as a static state of *being*, but rather as an ongoing process of *becoming* through social interactions and continual negotiations with dominant narratives (Bamberg, 2011; De Fina, 2013; Gee, 2012.)

This study draws from qualitative research traditions that treat all data as a co-construction between researcher and participants (Creswell, 2013). This study uses narrative analysis methods to provide rich, detailed information about individuals experiences with phenomena. Narrative methods provide opportunities for researchers to amplify experiences "most often invisible, silent, composed, and lived on the margins" (Huber et al., 2013). Note that the stories and talk that result from this study are not regarded necessarily as historically accurate or objective truths but rather co-constructed narratives that connect to individual understandings of events and experiences. These narratives are embedded within other narratives including social and historical narratives, or dominant narratives, which operate in conversation with the individual narrations shared. Dominant narratives are defined in this study as messages that communicate commonly held assumptions about what it means to be a particular kind of person in particular contexts (Bamberg 2011; Gee, 2012). Multiple theories overlap to form this multifaceted theoretical lens of discursive identity recognition (Bamberg, 2011; Gee, 2012) and identities-in-interaction (Bamberg 2010; De Fina, 2013; Gee, 2000). This lens includes scholarship that recognizes disability as a social identity that is continually recognized and positioned within dynamic social contexts (Clare, 2017; Dunn & Burcaw, 2013) including in families (Gee, 1998; Lalvani & Polvere, 2013) and schools (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021; Mueller, 2021; Nario-Redmond, 2013). This framework supports the exploration of identity sensemaking processes with adults who were once in special education classes and now are parenting children also identified with educational disabilities in US public schools.

Figure 1

Qualitative Research Frameworks Used in Study



This study defines identity sensemaking as the continual process by which identity is recognized and positioned in dynamic contexts and frames identity sensemaking in alignment with the foundational concept of sensemaking as "the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). The process of how students rationalize what they “are doing” in classes designated for specialized instruction of students identified with educational disabilities is important to study due to “special education and related disability research that treats individuals with disabilities as a subject under intervention, rather than meaning-makers, capable of creating community, negotiating stigma, and articulating the changes that need to be made to make their communities more inclusive” (Mueller, 2021; p. 202). This sensemaking process requires investigation through a lens aimed at the recognition and positioning of identity messages often identifiable through euphemism, silences, and ability hierarchies (Linton, 1998; Nusbaum & Steinborn, 2019; Smith & Mueller, 2021). This chapter will describe this theoretical lens as it relates to constructs of identity and disability within the contexts of special education research and practice.

Constructs and Contexts of Identity

The construct of identity, or the kind of person one is recognized to be in dynamic contexts (Gee, 2000), is defined differently by different populations and different disciplines depending on specific contexts. In the Western social sciences, including within the fields of education and special education, identity is widely viewed as a developmental, stage-based process that enters a critical phase of formation during adolescence (Erikson, 1968). The most recognized scholar of identity formation, Erik

Erikson, developed his lifespan framework of identity that continues to influence identity research today (Sokol, 2009). Erikson's emphasis on the importance of the development of a static core identity established a foundation for identity scholars to focus on the dynamic nature of identity salience, or identity relevance within specific settings, which impacts individuals based on interactive contextual factors (Erikson, 1959; Marcia, 1993; Stets & Burke, 2000; Tajfel, 1974; Tafel & Turner, 1985).

Making sense of identity dilemmas and decisions takes place during the earliest social experiences starting within families (Erikson, 1969; Sokol, 2009) and expanding to first education and care environments (Chen, 2009). This identification process includes identity recognition and prioritization relate to where one fits within early social hierarchies (Chen, 2009; Sokol, 2009). Early on, messages about what is recognized as valued identities come from the most important caregivers in a young child's life (Gee, 2012). Though it may seem (especially to the adolescent) that adolescents are constructing highly individualized identities without influence from family, adult care providers, peer influence, and cultural messaging, the building blocks of identity are co-created through individual responses to "partly pre-given templates" of identity (Schachter & Ventura, 2008; p. 453). This process of developing these templates begins well before adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Sokol, 2009). When groups designated as diverse, special, or otherwise *other than normal* lack these templates, the signifiers of what is considered different are considered unmentionable within relational contexts (Nusbaum & Steinborn, 2019). This can lead to stigma and other barriers to optimal identity coherence, or what parts of themselves make sense based on recognition of how they fit within dynamic contexts of daily life (Goffman, 1963; McLean, 2016; Nusbaum

& Steinborn, 2019). This study uses Discourse analyst and identity theorist, James Paul Gee's working definition of identity as "the 'kind of person' one is recognized as 'being,' at a given time and place" which can change depending on context (2000, p. 99) as it fits within general sensemaking frameworks as well as how positioning analysts Michael Bamberg (2011) and Anna De Fina (2013) use sensemaking in their discursive-constructionist framing of identity.

Identity and Discourse

Asking how certain kinds of people make sense in certain contexts is a "macro-level question" (Gee, 2000; p. 111) that has to do with Discourses, or "identity kits" that communicate expectations from individuals and groups of people who achieve or ascribed social identities. Gee differentiates "small-d" discourses as everyday language including "speaking(writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations" (1990, p. 142). These D/discourses are in continual conversation with each other; this engagement works as an ongoing "conversation" between local talk/everyday language (Gee, 2017).

Here it is important to elaborate on how discourses are communicated through multiple forms of what discourse analysts such as Gee describe as language (2000). This language is not just spoken communication but may be also recognized as silences, visual representations, and other forms of non-verbal messaging (Gee, 2000; Holland, et al., 2001; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001).

Identities in Interaction

Identity positioning is seen through two main interpretations. One view sees individuals as "being positioned" (Davies & Harre, 1990; Harre & van Langenhove, 1999) and as semi-agentive through the ability to choose positions from available discursive tools (Bamberg, 2004a). Another perspective of identity positioning sees identities as performances where identity positions can be more agentively chosen in acts of self-revision (Bamberg, 2004a; Butler, 1995). Bamberg argues for a merged perspective useful for discursive-narrative identity analysts to "circumvent the aporia of two opposing subject theories" by focusing on the interactive process of positioning (2006; p.147). Analyzing identities-in-interaction within a dialogic engagement between dominant narratives and locally situated stories and talk allows identity researchers to show how subjects position themselves vis-à-vis dominant narratives by which they are positioned (Bamberg, 2004).

Representational Systems and Dominant Narratives

Both processes of identity recognition and identity positioning emphasize the importance of language and D/discourse in the process of identity sensemaking by highlighting how individuals use language to construct and negotiate their identities within social contexts. Gee’s identity as an analytic lens (2000) uses pre-determined but overlapping and interactive categories to make sense of identity amid different contextual influences. Positioning analysis focuses primarily on the dialogic influence of dominant narratives on the continual process of identity sensemaking (De Fina, 2013). Both processes stress the dynamic and contextual nature of identity sensemaking, underscoring the ongoing process of identity formation through language use and discursive-narrative practices.

Identity as an Analytic Lens for Educational Research

James Paul Gee, in his seminal theoretical work of identity as an analytic lens for educational research, created a working definition of identity as “the ‘kind of person’ one is recognized as ‘being,’ at a given time and place” which can change depending on context (2000, p. 99). According to Gee, all people have multiple identities connected to how they are recognized in dynamic contexts (2000; Gee, 2016). Gee details how identity is significant to educational research by outlining four ways to view identity within school contexts (Gee, 2000). Gee’s four ways (2000) are described in this study as identity dimensions:

- Nature-identity (N-identity) is an internal state developed from natural causes.
- Institution-identity (I-identity) is a position ascribed by authorities within institutions.
- Discourse-identity (D-identity) is a trait recognized through discourse and dialogue and
- Affinity-identity (A-identity) is developed through choosing to share practices with those who share freely chosen common experiences (2000).

Gee is careful to emphasize that these four ways of being a certain kind of person are not isolated from one another; they interact in complex and crucial ways (2000). He illustrates this interaction through an example of a student who is marked as different in appearance and performance, prompting institutional evaluation processes (Baynton, 2001; Gee, 2000). This evaluative process identifies the student as the type of person who “has ADHD” caused by the natural state of a particular neurotype—N-Identity (Gee, 2000). With the diagnosis and other educational factors, this student may gain ADHD as an I-Identity as the *kind of person who has an educational disability designation of OHI* and is now *the kind of student who receives special education services*. These two identities, according to Gee, are also supported by intertwined discourses (D-Identity) recognizing and reinforcing overlapping identity dimensions ascribed by institutions (2000).

Gee's hypothetical student's behaviors are treated through evaluation as N- and I-Identities (2000). These identities may be sustained by D-identities through how this student is discussed (either directly or to others) and responded to: "When an identity is underwritten and sustained by an institution, that institution works, across time and space, to see to it that certain sorts of discourse, dialogue, and interactions happen often enough and in similar enough ways to sustain the I-Identities it underwrites" (Gee, 2000; p. 105). Gee connects this example of child-with-ADHD to scenarios of one day growing up to choose affiliation with "affinity group" or A-Identity (2000) related to ADHD. When Gee's analysis was published (2000), ADHD support and advocacy groups were cited as a recent example of potential sources of identity affiliation. These groups may be institutionally sanctioned or may hold tension between the identities ascribed by institutions or recognized as natural and communicated through discursive messages (Gee, 2000). Gee's work is vital for considering the impact of educational settings and practices on identity sense-making processes.

Primary, Secondary, Dominant and Non-Dominant Discourses

This study uses the term dominant narratives to designate the influence of background assumptions communicated implicitly or explicitly on identity sensemaking, though Gee uses different language to describe similar concepts important to discursive-narrative identity analysis. As evident in his identity heuristic, Gee's view recognizes how identities overlap and form *combinations* (2000). These combinations form the discursive identity kits of Discourse (Gee, 1989). Gee elaborates, "These combinations I call ‘Discourses,’ with a capital ‘D’ (‘discourse,’ with a little ‘d,’ to me, means connected stretches of language that make sense, so ‘discourse’ is part of ‘Discourse’” (1989; p.6). These ways of being *kinds of people* who are recognized as fitting (or not) within particular contexts make up primary and secondary Discourses (Gee, 1989; p.6). The following figure elaborates on the types, origins, and functions of these Discourses.

Figure 2

Big-D Discourses as Identity Tool Kits

Discourses as Identity Tool Kits

This study talks about the process of figuring out what kind of person we are at different times and in different places. This process is referred to as "identity sensemaking" and it is influenced by messages we receive without even realizing it.

James Paul Gee (2012) says that our identities are shaped by combinations of different messages that come from different sources. He calls these combinations "Discourses" with a capital "D." Each Discourse acts like a set of tools in the form of messages about how to act and talk in certain situations (Gee, 2012). There are primary, secondary, dominant and non-dominant Discourses.

Primary Discourse

The first set of identity tools learned at home through adult caregivers; the tools needed to become fluent in this script for “how to be a certain kind of person” are learned naturally (Gee, 2012).

Secondary Discourses

Sets of identity tools acquired outside of the primary Discourse; the script needed to use secondary Discourses must be learned (Gee, 2012). Examples include how to be a student or how to be a teacher.

Dominant Discourses

A secondary Discourse that is always acquired after or alongside the primary Discourse; these identity tools allow access to a learned script recognized by those in power as normal/beneficial/profitable socially (Gee, 2012).

Non-Dominant Discourses

These identity tools are secondary Discourses useful for connecting to, or with, social identity groups; these tools do not allow you access to dominant culture (normal/expected/valued) social connections (Gee, 2012)

A primary Discourse is the first identity kit learned at home via interactions with primary caregivers and family members (Gee, 1989). Secondary Discourses are identity kits acquired outside of the primary Discourse (Gee, 1989). Gee also describes the difference between dominant and nondominant Discourses. Dominant Discourses are secondary Discourses—always learned after/alongside mastery of primary Discourse tools—which by using the "tools" offered will lead to the potential earning of social "goods" (Gee, 1989). Nondominant Discourses are secondary Discourses learned that allow access to or solidarity with a particular social network though fluency in these Discourses does not impact higher status/access to dominant culture social goods (Gee, 1989). Gee considers the tension between Discourses as a key factor influencing identity recognition making up the social and historical influences that shape individual discourses (1989).

Identity analysts such as Bamberg (2011) and De Fina (2013) recognize the influence of dominant Discourses on identity. They view identity sensemaking as an ongoing process of positioning that is best understood by examining the interactive elements in everyday narratives, especially in naturalistic stories known as small stories (Bamberg, 2011; De Fina, 2013). In small stories, the analysis focuses on the dynamic interplay between how the storyteller, participants, and narrator's positioning interact within the assumptions about identity in dominant narratives (De Fina, 2013).

Counter(ing) Narratives and Identity Positioning

Bamberg and colleagues (2011) emphasize the interconnected nature of accepting and resisting dominant narratives, highlighting the complex interplay of compliance, opposition, and negotiation involving local discourse in situating one's identity vis-à-vis dominant narratives. Dominant narratives act as a "background of assumptions" woven through hegemonic norms—social and historical systems of power—and are used to make sense of how identities fit within certain kinds of actions, ideas, or feelings (Bamberg, 2021; p. 126). How identities are represented in dominant narratives may encourage or silence connection to identities in everyday storytelling (Bamberg, 2021). Bamberg notes that countering dominant narratives is not necessarily a binary process of accepting or rejecting but rather a nuanced understandings of fitting into dominant narrative expectations through ruptured connections that resemble complications rather than straightforward counternarratives (Bamberg, et al., 2011). This ongoing positioning is reflected in narrators' acceptance, rejection, and complication of relationships with dominant narratives in their stories and conversations across naturalistic and interview contexts (De Fina, 2013). This process of complying, countering, and complicating dominant narrative assumptions takes place simultaneously as part of ongoing and contextualized identity positioning processes (2021) that work to make sense of how who-am-I questions are continually answered (Bamberg, et al., 2011; Bamberg, 2021).

Disability Identity Negotiation

The way identity messages about disability are negotiated influences how disabled individuals navigate stigma by deciding to hide traits associated with disability or connect to a disability through self-identification as an individual and as a member of a social group (Bogart et al., 2017; Dirth & Branscome, 2018; Nario-Redmond, et al., 2013; Nario-Redmond & Oleson, 2016). Disability is increasingly recognized as a social identity formed through interactions with social messages and individual perceptions (Bogart, 2014; Dirth & Branscombe, 2018; Forber-Pratt et al., 2017). Disability identity messages vary within two primary models discussed here: functional limitation models and social models.

Models of Disability

Disability has been and continues to be defined differently depending on historical, disciplinary, and paradigmatic contexts (Danforth, 2001; Olkin, 2002). Two broad models of disability are useful for this study's focus on educational disability sensemaking. The first model assigns disability through the recognition of impairments or deficits that are internally located within individuals (Clare, 2001). This model is known outside of special education as a medical model (Olkin, 2002) but this framing of disability is known in educational contexts as a functional limitations model (Danforth, 2001) A functional limitations model is considered "dominant within special education law, research, university teacher preparation, and day-to-day public school activities. This model formulates disability as an individual phenomenon of psychological, physical, or behavioral deficit" (Danforth, 2001; 344). The goals of institutions and practitioners who work within the parameters of this model—including educational models of disability (Danforth, 2001; Heroux, 2017) focus on cure or "amelioration of the disability to the greatest extent possible" (Olkin, 2002; 133). Social models, broadly, consider disability to be a social construction. The goals of social model adherents are to address injustices that disable individuals due to lack of access or discrimination (Olkin, 2022).

Social Model as Interaction

Disability studies theorists write of the liberating draw of the social model of disability (Shakespeare & Watson, 2002). Disability rights activists embraced social models to replace a traditional, functional limitations-focused view of disability, which viewed problems associated with disability to be located within individual deficits requiring remediation or cure, with a model that connected disability-related problems to social oppression (Oliver, 1982; Shakespeare & Watson, 2002). "Suddenly, people were able to understand that they weren’t at fault: society was. They didn’t need to change: society needed to change” (Shakespeare & Watson, 2002; p. 28). However, disability justice scholars also recognized and amplified experiences that reflected a more nuanced interplay between internal and external factors that contribute to the construction of disability (Clare, 2001). This evolution of the social model included how social factors aided or exacerbated impairments recognized to be internally located in their body and/or mind such as pain, fatigue, depression, or confusion, rather than solely socially constructed barriers and affordances (Clare, 2001; Oliver, 1982; Shakespeare & Watson, 2002). This recognition acknowledged dynamic contexts where, sometimes, those with disabled bodies and/or minds may wish to change (Clare, 2017).

Binaries of adherence to functional limitations models or social models can be addressed with an expanded social model. This model can recognize deficits or impairments as natural yet potentially undesired while focusing on the interaction of these differences from expected norms and a world not designed for them (Clare, 2001). These nuances are apparent in the storied experiences of disabled people: “Disability identity is about stories, having the space to tell them, and an audience which will listen. It is also about recognising differences, and isolating the significant attributes and experiences which constitute disability. Some we might choose to change, others to recuperate or celebrate.” (Shakespeare, 1996; p. 113).

Implications of Recognizing Disability as a Social Identity

Social identity involves recognizing one's membership in a social group and attributing significance to that group membership (Tajfel, 1974). Disability identity is characterized by "a sense of self that includes one’s disability and feelings of connection to, or solidarity with, the disability community" (Dunn & Burcaw, 2013, p. 148). This emphasis on connecting with others who share similar disability experiences is crucial for understanding disability identity formation (Forber-Pratt et al., 2017), including processes within educational settings. Disability self-categorization occurs when individuals recognize their impairment as a disability, while disability self-identification is when they define themselves as a person with a disability (Bogart & Nario-Redmond, 2019). Factors influencing disability identity include the nature of the impairment, demographic characteristics, and environmental influences such as social support. Bogart and Nario-Redmond argue that focusing solely on functional limitation model centered perspectives and impairment categories limits the possibilities for individuals to identify with the disability community at both individual and group levels (2019).

When making sense of disability identity, individuals engage in a dialogue between their personal understanding of disability and the societal messages about disability in their environment. Unlike identities such as gender or race, it is typical for children with disabilities to grow up in families where adult caregivers are not disabled themselves (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021), potentially impacting how children with disabilities perceive themselves. Messages about disability identity are often transmitted through adult figures who may not have experienced similar identity challenges (Schachter & Ventura, 2008), influencing how children perceive their own disability identity (Forber-Pratt et al., 2017).

Stigma

Connecting to disability as a social group identity involves recognizing and positioning disability identity in conversation with dominant narratives about disability, including stigma. Seminal stigma scholar Erving Goffman defined stigma as "*deeply discrediting traits* that can reduce a whole and usual person to tainted discredited one" (1963, p. 3). Goffman clarified that traits should not be the sole focus of stigma research and that any study of stigma must use "a language of relationships, not attributes" since what is considered stigmatizing in one context can be considered normal in another (1963, p. 4). Stigma may involve discrimination based on these dynamically perceived attributes, though this discrimination is not always considered negative (Goffman, 1963). Goffman cites the trope of blind people possessing an enhanced sense of smell as ascribing "desirable but undesired attributes" (1963; p.5). He explains that no matter the slant of the discrimination, stigma communicates, at least to some degree, that identities regarded as spoiled or discredited are also considered to be, at least to some extent, less than human due to being positioned as other-than-normal (Goffman, 1963). This is relevant to the positioning of some students, especially those considered to be diverse or *special,* as something other than the expected norm (Thorius, 2019).

Research in the tradition of social identity theory (SIT) (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Turner et al., 1987) highlights that individuals belonging to stigmatized or low-status groups gain access to collective strategies in proportion to their strong and positive identification with the stigmatized group (Lindly et al., 2014; Outten et al., 2009). Self-identification with a group is commonly understood as comprising both cognitive and affective dimensions, where identification entails understanding group membership as integral to one's self-concept, combined with favorable emotions toward group affiliation (Tajfel, 1978).

Concealment and Connection

A concealable stigmatized identity is categorized by traits that are associated with social devaluation but can be kept hidden from others (Crocker et al.,1998). This process of concealment is often known as passing. “The option of passing provides a certain level of privilege and a profound sense of misrecognition and internal dissonance” (Samuels, 2003; p. 239). The social identity of disability is not monolithic; people with disabilities vary in how apparent their disabilities are, and how consistently their disability is apparent to others (Forber-Pratt, et al, 2021). This variation includes the ability to conceal impairments recognized as disability to achieve identities (Gee, 2000) recognized as close-to-normal.

Individuals with stigmatized yet concealable identities experience more psychological distress compared to those with stigmatized identities that are not concealable (Frable, et al., 1998). Creating community connections with others who share stigmatized identities can provide a protective effect; however, this is less likely to occur among those with stigmatized concealable identities (Frable, et al., 1998). Therefore, those with concealable disability identities are least likely to use protective strategies involving community access and support and more likely to use concealment strategies which potentially lead to psychological distress (Bogart 2014; Nario-Redmond, et al., 2013).

Disability Pride

Social and functional limitation models have been discursively positioned in a binary that may not offer much to people with disabilities compared to embracing more expansive social-interactive models (Olkin, 2002) Acknowledging both internal and external barriers may lead to stronger community relationships with both non-disabled and disabled people (Olkin, 2002). These disability community connections offer support, solutions, and the potential for disability pride (Bogart et al., 2018; Olkin, 2002). This potential is important, according to disability studies theorists, because without it individual and collective organizing against oppression is difficult, if not possible (Clare, 2009). Pride allows social groups to question conditions of bias and resist dominant narratives through ruptures that complicate what is taken for granted based on dominant narratives (Bogart et al., 2018; Clare, 2009).

Educational Disability Identity Sensemaking in US Public Schools

Understanding how educational disability identity sensemaking takes place with US public school students in special education classes requires an overview of how special education works in the US. This overview will include a brief review of disability history in the US with a particular focus on how educational disability is conceptualized in this country.

Overview of the Special Education System in the United States

Even while identity formation processes are increasingly the focus of educational research (Kaplan & Flum, 2012; Oyserman & Dawson, 2021), the process of educational disability identity formation remains understudied (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021; Mueller, 2021) The Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) defines a “child with disability” in Section 300.8 as “having an intellectual disability, a hearing impairment (including deafness), a speech or language impairment, a visual impairment (including blindness), a serious emotional disturbance (referred to in this part as “emotional disturbance”), an orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, an other health impairment, a specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, or multiple disabilities, and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services” (2004).

Assigning disability labels has historically served discriminatory, classifying and descriptive functions (Artiles et al., 2016). Groups who would not be considered disabled by current standards but were different from the accepted norms of the past were often discriminated against through assigned disability labels justifying unequal treatment based on deviation from social norms (2016). Today, disability labels serve as objects of protection, with rights and services deemed special provided through identification and/or categorization, as well as potential objects of discrimination (Artiles et al., 2016). Understanding the effects of assigning and communicating disability labels is crucial when exploring the topics of special education and educational disability identity development in research discussions.

Educational Disability

The primary purpose of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is to ensure that all children with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education, including special education and related services that are "designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment and independent living …" (20 U.S.C. 1400(d)). IDEA provides a framework for students with disabilities to receive educational services designated as appropriate, but not all disabilities automatically qualify for these services (Yell, 1998). In addition to meeting eligibility criteria for one of the 13 IDEA categories of educational disabilities, the disability must adversely affect their educational progress and require specially designed instruction, necessitating an individualized education plan (IEP) (Yell, 1998).

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) data for the academic year 2021–22, 15% of public school students in the United States received specialized instruction under IDEA through the provision of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) (NCES, 2023). The largest group, constituting 32 percent, had specific learning disabilities (LD), followed by speech or language impairments (SLI) at 19 percent (NCES, 2023). Other categories included other health impairments (OHI) at 15 percent and autism (ASD) at 12 percent (NCES, 2023). A smaller portion fell under developmental delays, intellectual disabilities, and emotional disturbances (ED), each accounting for between 5 and 7 percent (NCEE, 2023). Less common disabilities like multiple disabilities, hearing impairments, orthopedic impairments, visual impairments, traumatic brain injuries, and deaf-blindness affected 2 percent or fewer students served under IDEA (NCES, 2023). While there is growing interest in providing special education services within regular education settings, current data does not specify the percentage of special education instruction offered in regular education classrooms. In fall 2021, over two-thirds of students with disabilities, including speech or language impairments (88 percent), specific learning disabilities (75 percent), and other health impairments (70 percent), spent 80 percent or more of their school day in general classes (NCES, 2023).

Navigating Stigma

Since the field began, special education has grappled with the stigma associated with disability labels and being marked as students requiring specialized instruction (Artiles et al., 2016; Fox & Marini, 2017; Hallahan, 1974; Kode, 2002). Seminal stigma scholar Erving Goffman emphasizes that the study of stigma must use “a language of relationships, not attributes" (1963, p. 4) as what is considered stigmatizing in one context can be considered normal in another. Stigma involves discrimination based on dynamically perceived attributes, though this discrimination is not always perceived as negative (Goffman, 1963). Goffman cites the trope of blind people possessing an enhanced sense of smell as ascribing "desirable but undesired attributes" (1963; p.5). He explains that no matter the slant of the discrimination, stigma causes members of a dominant group to believe that a person who possesses an identity marked as other-than-normal is, at least to some degree, less than human (1963). This is relevant to the positioning of some students, especially those considered to be *special*, as something other than the expected norm (Thorius, 2019).

Benevolent Stigma

An everyday example of benevolent stigma is found in the reaction that teachers of populations deemed other-than-regular receive when they introduce themselves as someone who teaches in urban schools, schools that receive federal funding for being considered low-income, students who are learning English and/or students who receive special education services (Thorius, 2019). Frequently, the reaction to these teachers is that they must be saintly, or *very special* people, as evidenced by their occupation (2019). The positioning of this certain ways of learning and teaching as *exceptional* connects to affiliations with benevolent stigma experienced by teachers of these populations (Thorius, 2022). Intersectional identity scholars such as Thorius ask questions about how stigma is enacted through how specific identity markers are (and are not) addressed in (special) education (2022).

Importance of Identity Resources

Disabled people now have access to institutions--and are free from others--in ways that are increasingly taken for granted by the “ADA generation” or adults who have experienced the benefits of rights-based legislation since the Americans with Disabilities Act was enacted in 1990 (Forber-Pratt & Zape, 2017; Linton, 1998). Dominant narratives continue to influence how stigma-laden messages of difference and deficit are communicated and internalized by those identified with disabilities (Linton, 1998) including educational disabilities (Smith & Mueller, 2021).

It has been taken for granted in disability studies research that narratives about disability are often constructed solely by non-disabled researchers and practitioners (Biklen, 1988; Bogdan, 2017; Mueller, 2021). The impact of this is not yet widely acknowledged in the special education research contexts but is gaining increased interest (Forber-Pratt, et al., 2021, Mueller, 2021). In educational settings, disability is largely absent in representations as a potentially valued social identity (Nusbaum & Steinborn, 2019). This absence holds hegemonic power that shapes how disability is made sense of in conversation with norms that take for granted or “tacitly accept dominant norms and privileges” (Broderick and Lalvani, 2017; p. 2). Thus, disability identity as a *way of being* or a potentially valued social identity is erased, silenced, and made largely unnamable (Broderick & Lalvani, p. 2017; Mueller, 2021; Nusbam & Steinborn, 2019).

Identity Safe Schools

Hernández and Darling-Hammond’s research focuses on the creation of identity-safe schools to counter dominant narratives associated with race, ethnicity, gender or gender identity, language, immigration status, or any other feature that is associated with social stigma associated with being marked as other-than-normal (2022). Research-based practices promoting trusting connections with students and families, reciprocal communication frameworks, and elevating diversity as a resource for learning are pillars of Darling-Hammond's identity-affirming resources (2002) used in identity-safe school frameworks (Hernández & Darling-Hammond, 2022).

It should be noted that while the resources connected with Hernández and Darling-Hammond's identity-safe school framework included disability in the list of identities at risk for being discriminated against in school contexts, disability as an identity marker was only specified 3 times in the 26-page document with it being listed 2 times in the Executive Summary (v) among a list of at-risk identity markers, and among another list of identity-based bullying risk factors in the Introduction (2022; p.1). When "ability" is mentioned, it is most often connected to practices of grouping or tracking presumably nondisabled Black and Latinx students based on harmful stereotypes about race and ethnicity (Hernández & Darling-Hammond, 2022). This exclusion of explicit discussion about disability highlights the entanglement of identities deemed other-than-normal and the particular risk of disability identity being excluded as a potentially valued identity for minoritized racial and ethnic groups (Annamma et al., 2013). What may set disability apart from identity markers such as race and ethnicity is the deeply rooted assumption that the barriers presented are not a product of bias but produced by the individual's innate biology and in need of solutions provided by interventions marked as "special" (Boda, 2022).

Making Sense of Educational Disability in Schools

Relevant to identity sensemaking processes in special education is exploratory research engaging adults with disabilities through life story interviews about their lived experience receiving special education services (Mueller, 2021). The interviews reflect a lack of representation in curriculum, disconnection from disability community, and an absence of potential identity agents (2021). Absent disability identity resources were identified as important barriers to potentially beneficial disability identity formation by these participants (2021). These data from Mueller's study echo a common refrain from disability justice scholars and activists who point to lack of representation as a barrier to identity tool kits which would potentially allow more effective navigation of stigma and connection to disability community (Annamma et al., 2013; Gallagher et al., 2014; Linton, 1998). Mueller describes how the social meaning of disability is deemphasized and denigrated by citing Annamma and colleagues' implication of non-recognition of disability as a potential social identity for students who "are often positioned such that they are likely (and even encouraged) to reject identifying as disabled as something that is inherently negative" (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 8). The overarching implication resulting from the major themes in this study is that special education is uniquely situated to support and repair dominant discursive messages communicating that "children in special education are different, incompetent, and unsavory" (Linton, 1998, p. 63). Future directions toward this goal, according to Mueller, include prioritizing disability representation in teacher education programs at every level including curricular and pedagogical, and through emphasis on disabled teacher recruitment, admissions, and support (2021).

Building Blocks of Identity in Schools with Families

Expanding family partnership frameworks to include disability identity resources is essential for special education research. The rationale for developing practices to support connection to disability identity resources with families with young children entering the special education system stems from the developmental identity process where identification messages from parents and adult care providers form the building blocks of identity during early childhood (Erikson, 1968; Sokol, 2009).

Prioritizing discussions about the potential value of disability identity aligns with ongoing efforts to engage in early transition-focused conversations about self-advocacy and self-determination goals (Haydon & Masthay-Bermudez, 2022; Kleinhammer-Tramill et al., 1994; Wehmeyer et al., 1999). Research on self-knowledge, including understanding disability as a potentially valued identity, fits within transition frameworks that support early planning and collaboration with families for equitable self-determination goals (Evans, 2017; Leake, 2012). Providing connections to identity agents, which may involve older students, graduates, or mentorship programs (Schachter & Rich, 2011) to offer families and children models of disability pride, (Bogart et al., 2014).

Conclusion

This theoretical framework blends social constructivist and interactionist theoretical lenses to support the qualitative exploration of special education identity sensemaking processes with former students who are currently parenting students with similar experiences. An expansive social model of disability is used within this framework to support an inquiry into the interactive processes of identity sensemaking connected to being identified with educational disabilities which require specialized instruction outside of general education settings. The methods of this qualitative discursive narrative inquiry will be described and justified in detail in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study’s research design and questions explore how parents recognize educational disability identity in group and individual interview contexts, and how they position their identity in narrated experiences as a former student and current parent through acceptance, complication, questioning, or rejecting the dominant narratives related to special education. The primary purpose of this qualitative inquiry is to explore identity sensemaking as recognized and positioned in the stories and talk of adults who were in special education classes as students and who are now parenting children who have been identified with educational disabilities. The secondary purpose of this inquiry is to amplify the perspectives of adults with experiences as special education students as both student and parent in alignment with qualitative research traditions intended to "critique and challenge, to transform and empower," emphasizing a commitment to creating scholarship aimed at effecting social change (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 10). Although there is no shortage of research about students identified with educational disabilities who receive specialized instruction in special education classrooms, this study prioritizes research that puts the perspectives of former students who are parents of current special education students at the center of the inquiry.

Rationale for Research

The rationale for this dissertation research study aligns with qualitative research paradigms that prioritize an understanding of power dynamics within the research context. As emphasized by Merriam & Merriam (2009), awareness of power structures, identity negotiation processes, and societal reinforcement mechanisms is essential. This study intends to operationalize this awareness by providing platforms for participants to share their experiences within these systems through narratives and discourse elicited in a manner that makes explicit expectations for contributions to be shared--or not--as they are most comfortable. By working to co-create opportunities for participants to self-identify and elaborate on dynamic identities related to disability, this study uncovers how power operates within these participants' understandings of identity (Mueller, 2021). Narrative sharing, described as *stories and talk* to emphasize the inclusion of small stories that may not conform to canonical life stories with narrativized beginning-middle-end structures (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008), related to experiences in special education, perspectives as parents of students in special education, and the intersection of these experiences with dominant narratives surrounding *being in special education*. Through methods that align with discourse and identity positioning analytic frameworks, this study seeks to amplify the complex interplay of identity recognition and positioning within the broader landscape of social and historical messages about special education.

Role of Researcher

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) distinguish between two dimensions of ethics in qualitative research, which help inform decisions about the quality of relationships that should be established between researchers and participants. The first is procedural ethics, which involves adherence to institutional review board (IRB) guidelines concerning informed consent, confidentiality, privacy rights, and protection of human subjects (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). The second dimension is ethics in practice, dealing with ethically important disclosures and often unpredictable situations that arise during fieldwork (2004). Guillemin and Gilliam (2004) build upon these by introducing a third dimension called relational ethics, emphasizing mutual respect, connectedness, and responsible actions in the researcher-participant relationship and the situated contexts of the relationship (2004). Adherence to procedural ethics is essential, as is remaining reflexive about how ethics is enacted. Kellehear (1996) makes clear the delicate nature of remaining ethical in practice within interview contexts that are “the creation of an unnatural social situation, introduced by a researcher, for the purpose of polite interrogation” (p. 98). This can be challenging within interview-based research contexts that are “the creation of an unnatural social situation, introduced by a researcher, for the purpose of polite interrogation” (Kellehear, 1996; p. 98).

Because this study focuses on identity sensemaking for and by those who identified with educational disabilities, the self-disclosure of educational disability identification is justified by recognizing that experiences, discourses, and self-understandings intersect with dominant narratives about race, gender, class, and dis/ability (Denzin, 2016). The work of critical qualitative inquiry is to continually interrogate not simply "Who am I?" but situate that question within the questioner's contexts, the participants of the questioner's study, and the readers of that study's results (Denzin, 2016). I recognize that the situated nature of a qualitative study affirms, and even requires, the self-disclosure of shared disability identity experiences and narratives by the researcher who shares (some) similar experiences.

Self-disclosure

As a student attending US public schools, I was referred for special education evaluation at the end of kindergarten and continued to receive services in special education classrooms until high school graduation. Initially, I qualified for Gifted education but later was also identified with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) in Mathematics Computation. In 5th grade, I was moved out of the Gifted program and began receiving services in what was then known as the Emotionally Handicapped (now Emotional Disturbance) resource room, in addition to continued services in the SLD resource room. I continued to receive special education services in resource room settings until I graduated high school with a regular diploma. My current diagnostic roster includes ADHD – Inattentive type, C-PTSD, SPD, and LD. In most contexts, I typically self-identify as neurodivergent for reasons of brevity and appropriate disclosure.

My special education was situated within many protective identity components. As a white cisgender middle-class girl with less-apparent disabilities, I was able to fly under the radar, so to speak, through my alignment with dominant educational narratives related to “goodness” and “smartness” (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011). My early labeling as *gifted* prompted attention that both buffered my experience as an *exceptional student* as well as targeted me as *the kind of student* in need of intervention to meet my recognized *full potential.* I’ve included a table below explaining my placements in classrooms outside of settings considered *regular education* classrooms as a kindergarten through 12th grade public school student in the United States.

Table 1

Placement Trajectory of My "Exceptional" Student Services

Placement	***Services***	***Kindergarten***	***1st – 4th grades***	***5th – 8th grades***	***9th – 12th grades***
Off-site program	Gifted	X	X		
Specific learning disability (LD) resource room	LD for mathematics		X	X	
Emotionally handicapped (EH) resource room	EH for internalizing behavior			X	
Special education resource room	LD for mathematics and organization				X

I decided to disclose my own experience as a former special education student and provide brief narrations related to my own special education experience for a few reasons. A critically oriented study must address the historical exclusion of disabled perspectives and expand discussions on the impact of a researcher's identity on their work (Abell et al., 2006; Sheldon, 2017). Addressing exclusion of the perspectives of students identified with disabilities requires including former special education students as facilitators of special education research (Sheldon, 2017). Considering this, researchers, including education scholars with disabilities (Sheldon, 2017), must thoughtfully ask the question of what and how to disclose vis-à-vis shared experiences to participants (Abell et al., 2006). Practicing reflexivity in research with participants who share similar experiences related to disability involves being mindful not to assume similarity between the disabled researcher and participants with disabilities based solely on shared disability identification or other single aspects of identity (Sheldon, 2017). To this end, I attempted to make this distinction clear in my facilitation and contribution to storytelling and discussion.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study are:

Research Question 1: How are identities recognized in the stories and talk of adults who were in special education classes and are now parents of children identified with educational disabilities?

Research Question 2: How do these adults accept, counter, or complicate dominant narratives through a process of positioning their identity as “the kind of person” who is in special education and now parenting children identified with educational disabilities?

Research Methods and Study Design

The research design section addresses participant selection and settings, recruitment strategies, challenges related to automated responses, data collection methods, data analysis techniques, methodological tools for trustworthiness, and ensuring that findings align with research questions.

Participants and Settings

This section describes the selection process for participants in online group and individual interviews centered on experiences in special education. Zoom interviews were chosen to access a broader sample from a population that would have been challenging to recruit locally. The description of participant selection begins with a table displaying participant demographics. This demographic data was gathered during these participants' individual interviews to allow answers that go beyond survey items. This was especially important for this study and the recognition that disability is frequently experienced in dynamic and nuanced ways that disrupt social and historical binary understandings of dis/ability (Beneke & Mueller, 2022).

Table 2

Participant Demographic Information

Name	***Gender***	***Age***	***Race***	***Ethnicity***	***Highest level of education***	***"Do you consider yourself to be a disabled person and/or a person with a disability?"***
John	M	43	White	Non-Hispanic	2-year degree	"Yes."
Maureen	F	46	White	Non-Hispanic	4-year degree	"Yes."
Keisha	F	46	Black	Non-Hispanic	2-year degree	"I mean, personally myself, I do."
Tiffany	F	35	Bi-Racial; "mixed with white and Black"	Non-Hispanic	High school diploma	"I do have a disability, but I don't like…I don't label myself or go get SSI for it so I don't know how that would categorize."
J.B.	M	43	White	Non-Hispanic	Graduate school	"No. Not necessarily. No."

Selection of Participants

The participant selection process for this study involved specific inclusion criteria to ensure the selection of adults with relevant experiences in special education to explore identity sensemaking processes. Participants between 21 and 50 were sought who had spent at least one year in a special education classroom for receiving services through an Individualized Education Program (IEP) during their public school education experiences in the United States. They were also required to be parents of children from 3 to 22 years of age who had been in special education classes for at least a year. Those whose only involvement with special education was as Gifted education students were excluded due to this study's focus on educational disabilities. Purposive sampling techniques, primarily through online platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, were used for recruitment to reach the specific population needed for this study. Recruitment efforts included screening for automated responses and ensuring participants were based in the U.S. Ultimately, five adults were selected as core group participants, offering valuable insights into the experiences of those with educational disabilities.

Inclusion Criteria

Participants met the following inclusion criteria:

- Age: Participants were recruited within the age range of 21 to 50, representing the adult parent population. The upper age range is 50 because Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) were first implemented in the United States in 1975 with the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which is now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The lower limit of the age range was set because the purpose of this study is to explore the identity sensemaking process of adult parents of children who receive special education via specialized instruction in settings other than a general education, or "regular" classroom. Exploring the sensemaking experiences of minor parents with experiences as special education students who have young children in special education is outside the scope of this study. Participants ranged from 35 to 46 years old.

- Experience in special education: Participants must have spent at least one year in special education classrooms with specialized instruction through an Individual Educational Program (IEP) during their K-12 education in the United States. This criterion ensures that participants possess firsthand experience with special education classes outside of a classroom designated as “general education” and can offer valuable insights into the development of disability identity. While recruitment materials did not specify that participants received services in particular types of special education classrooms or specific educational disability categories, the focal participants experienced special education in resource classrooms for goals related to behavior or academics. Parents self-identified as receiving services for specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, other health impairment (for ADHD) and/or emotional disturbance.
- Parents of children identified with educational disabilities: Participants include parents of at least one child who is/has been in special education classes outside of the regular education classroom to receive special educational services through an IEP for at least one year. These services were received in resource and therapeutic settings outside of the regular education classroom.

Exclusion Criteria

Individuals were excluded if their only involvement with special education or exceptional student education services was limited to Gifted education, either for themselves or for their child's special education classroom experience. This criterion ensures that participants have experienced special education services specifically related to educational disabilities within special education classrooms not considered regular education classrooms, focusing on the unique perspectives of those who have navigated this aspect of the special education system.

Recruitment

Purposive sampling techniques were used to recruit participants, primarily through online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (Creswell, 2014; Vicente, 2023). The choice to recruit from these social media platforms was justified by their wide reach and popularity among potential participants (Vicente, 2023). When recruitment materials were posted on platforms or in forums that were publicly accessible with few filters or screening mechanisms, email accounts connected to the study were flooded, indicating that automated responses were being generated by “bots” (O’Donnell, et al., 2023). To screen for bot usage or participants who were solely seeking to participate to receive the 100-dollar Amazon gift card incentive, a process of responding to emails with a request to complete the initial screening request through the Qualtrics platform was approved and created (Griffin, et al., 2022). Materials used for recruitment purposes including recruitment flyers/visuals potsed online are included in this study’s appendix.

Overall, the participant recruitment process prioritized the inclusion of individuals with relevant experiences in special education, specifically focusing on identity sensemaking processes related to educational disability. 5 adults were selected as the focal group of participants. This group contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the research problem and provided valuable insights into the lived experiences of those identified as requiring specialized instruction for identified educational disabilities.

Overview of Data Collection

The choice of conducting online Story Circles (Oregon State University, 2020; Parks, 2023), individual semi-structured interviews and small group interviews (Gaskell, 2000) aligns directly with the dual purposes of the study to comprehensively explore the identity construction of adults with past special education experiences while prioritizing their perspectives in the research process. These methods allow for a rich understanding of participants' experiences and enable the sharing of identity sensemaking for themselves as students and parents while prioritizing their perspectives in the research process. This section includes a table showing how participants engaged in the co-creation of data sources for this study through participation in group interview sessions.

Story Circles

This study utilized Story Circles, a group data collection method (Parks, 2023), to gather narrative data from participants Inspired by the Free Southern Theater (FST), which used circles to collect personal narratives during the Civil Rights Movement (Davis, 2019), this data collection method aligns with the study aims to amplify marginalized voices and broaden understanding of underheard perspectives. Story Circles, rooted in indigenous and folk storytelling practices, emphasize personal stories and connections (Appalshop/Roadside Theater, 2016; Martinez, 2019; Ohio State University, 2019; US Department of Arts & Culture, 2015). Like focus groups, they gather perspectives on specific topics (Denzin & Ryan, 2007; Merton, 1987; Morgan & Spanish, 1984) but Story Circles provide alternating spaces for storytelling, story listening, and group discussion (Parks, 2023), fostering community connection among participants with shared identity experiences. Also, the Story Circle format allows the sharing of personal narratives and related discussion about individual and group identity experiences and acts as a useful vehicle for community connection among participants who recognize important similarities and differences in their shared identity experiences (US Department of Arts & Culture, 2015; Martinez, 2019).

Participants attended a required 30-minute introductory session to learn about the study's expectations. They were asked to attend at least two out of three scheduled Story Circle interviews estimated to run from 45 minutes to an hour. After determining that a portion (N=4) of Story Circle participants did not meet eligibility requirements, a focal group of participants (N=5) was asked to attend an additional group interview. This additional group interview was added after IRB approval. Though the development of deeper connections between participants through online group interviews and storytelling sessions cannot be predicted, it was gratifying to see supportive ongoing interactions take place between participants in these sessions. Story Circle and individual interview protocols are included in this study’s appendix.

Table 3

Participation in Group Interview Sessions

Participant	*Introduction*	*Story Circle 1*	*Story Circle 2*	*Story Circle 3*	*Small Group Interview*
John	x		x	x	x
Maureen	x	x		x	x
Keisha	x	x		x	x
Tiffany	x		x	x	x
J.B.	x		x	x	x

Note: Participant names are self-chosen pseudonyms.
***Suspected scammer participants (N=4) are excluded from this table.*

Suspected Scammer Participants

I became increasingly concerned as the Story Circle interviews neared completion with some participants warranting suspicion as potential scammers aimed at participating in studies to receive incentive payments without meeting the eligibility requirements of the study (Jones et al., 2021). While such participants have previously been labeled as “fraudsters” (Jones et al., 2021; Teitcher et al., 2015) or “imposters” (Ridge et al., 2023), this study follows the guidance of Pellicano and colleagues (2023) to avoid using language that aligns with disabled people’s stigmatized labels of fraud or imposter. Discussions with mentors and consulting with peer advisors clarified reasons to consider excluding these participants from further data collection, including:

- Participants' unusually straightforward scheduling process and eagerness to complete quickly.
- Frequent inquiries about incentive payments.
- Linguistic markers in their narratives hinted at potential inauthenticity, such as references to experiences not aligned with U.S. public school special education systems.
- Narratives inconsistent with U.S. special education frameworks and practices, like reports of abundantly assigned support staff not reflective of current or recent historical practices.

After meeting with the dissertation committee chair and methodologist with these suspicions and evidence to support the claim that some participants were scammers, I emailed the suspected scammers saying that their participation was no longer needed.

Small Group Interview

After three Story Circle sessions and the determination that some participants were suspected scammers, and after consultation with IRB about approval for an additional group interview, the participants recognized as authentic were contacted to arrange what was framed as a small group interview with “core group participants.” The rotation and discussion format of the Story Circle method shifted to a structure more closely aligned with an open and fluid focus group (Ryan et al., 2014). This core group (n=5) shared stories and engaged in conversation related to their shared social experiences associated with special education as students and parents. The iterative aspect of meeting for group Story Circle sessions prior to this group interview helped uncover relational dynamics and social interactions useful for gathering narrative data (Ryan et al., 2014).

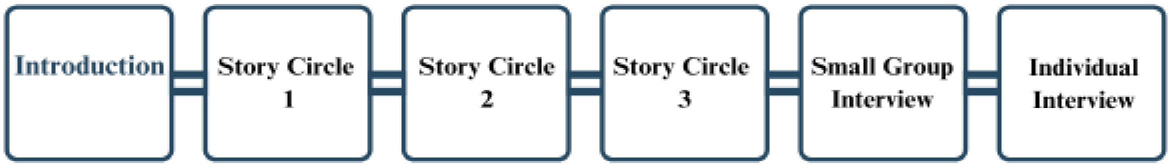
Individual Semi-Structured Interview

The individual semi-structured interviews served multiple purposes. First, they functioned as a form of member-checking, or participant validation (Birt et al., 2016; Candela, 2019) to ensure the initial analysis of Story Circle data is trustworthy according to the participants. Next, these interviews provided a space for participants to share their experiences of "being in" special education, both as former students and current parents of children in special education, in a one-on-one interaction with a researcher who can empathize with some aspects of their experiences.

To facilitate this, participants were asked to expand on stories shared in the previous group Story Circle and small group interviews. Prompts included questions about what they wished they would have known as special education students and share narratives about parenting a child in the special education system, emphasizing the significance of these stories for those responsible for special education. These interviews provided a platform for participants to share their narratives in a one-on-one setting, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of special education students and their parents who share similar experiences. Providing a mix of group and individual spaces for sharing allowed for variations in responses as participants became more comfortable sharing stories and talk in various online interview contexts. A figure describing the order of online data collection opportunities is included below.

Figure 3

Order of Online Narrative Data Collection Sessions

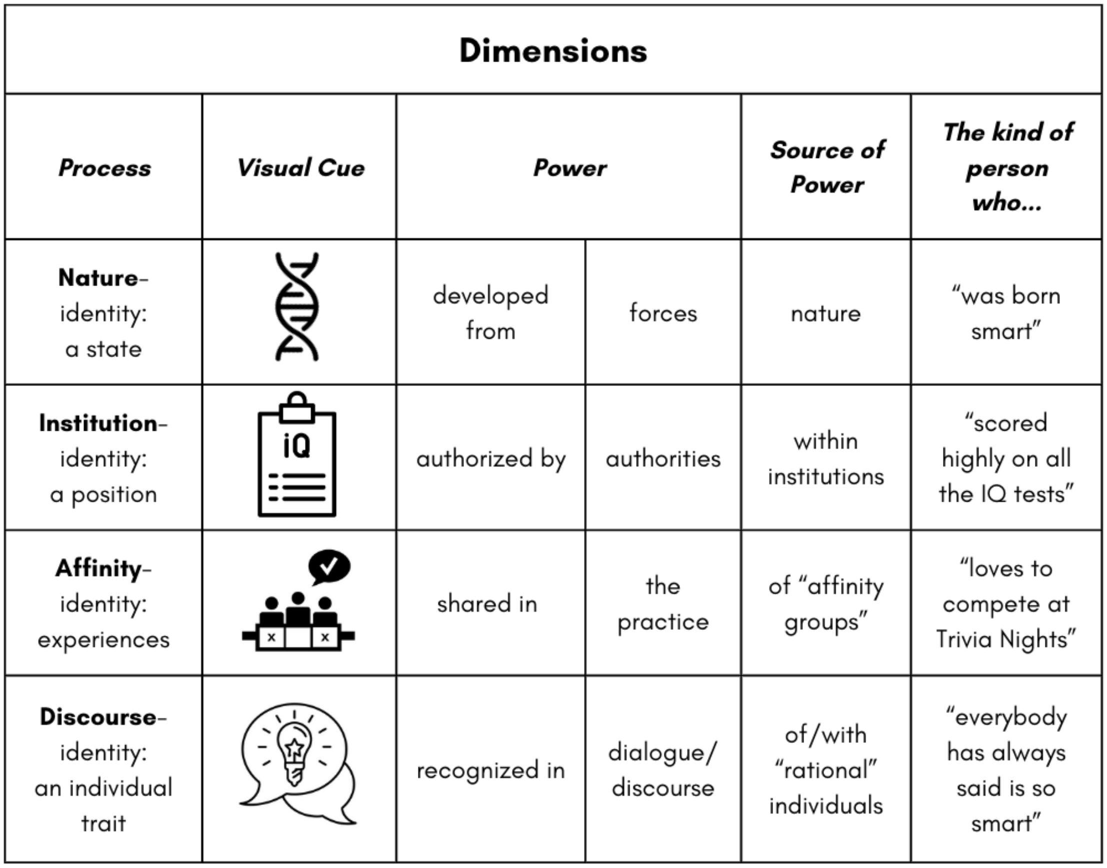


Data Analysis

I analyzed the data sources in this qualitative study to recognize and position the identities of former special education students and current parents of children with educational disabilities. The analysis started with transcribing and organizing all data from group and individual interviews, reflexive and analytic memos, and email correspondence. Next, Gee's framework guided my discursive analysis of identity recognition through questions aligned with identity as an analytic lens for educational research (2000). Included below is a figure that expands Gee's analytic framework to use simple visuals (DNA helix, clipboard holding an IQ test, three stylized figures competing in a game-show style competition with the middle figure receiving a check mark indicating a winning answer, and two overlapping speech bubbles with the dominant bubble containing a stylized light-bulb glowing with light) and includes a column that frames an identity of “being smart” within the four dimensions.

Figure 4

Dimensions of a Recognized Identity of “Being Smart”



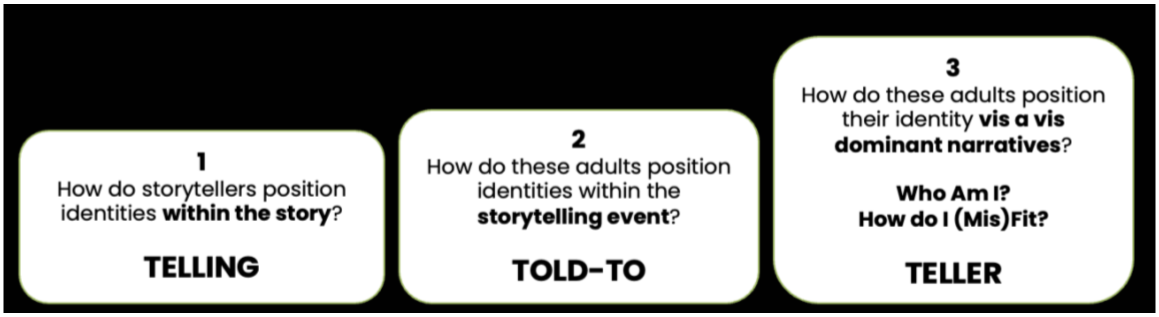
Dimensions					
Process	***Visual Cue***	***Power***		***Source of Power***	***The kind of person who...***
Nature- identity: a state		developed from	forces	nature	“was born smart”
Institution- identity: a position		authorized by	authorities	within institutions	“scored highly on all the IQ tests”
Affinity- identity: experiences		shared in	the practice	of “affinity groups”	“loves to compete at Trivia Nights”
Discourse- identity: an individual trait		recognized in	dialogue/ discourse	of/with “rational” individuals	“everybody has always said is so smart”

Note: Adapted from Gee’s Identity as an Analytic Lens for Educational Research (2000)

Then, using De Fina's positioning analysis (2013), I analyzed how participants responded to dominant identity messages in special education. A visual outlining the broad process of asking analytic questions connected to the three levels of DeFina’s use of Bamberg’s positioning analysis (2013) is here:

Figure 5

Three Levels of Positioning Analysis



1
How do storytellers position identities **within the story**?
TELLING

2
How do these adults position identities within the **storytelling event**?
TOLD-TO

3
How do these adults position their identity **vis a vis dominant narratives**?
Who Am I?
How do I (Mis)Fit?
TELLER

Note: Adapted from Bamberg, 2007 and DeFina, 2013.

More details regarding the analytic processes associated with the two research questions that drive this study are included as the chapter continues as I describe the processes used to address the research questions on identity recognition and positioning in this part of the chapter, with a table summarizing the analysis steps at the section's end.

Transcription

I transcribed and organized all data gathered from university-approved Zoom video and audio recording transcription services as the base for continued transcription. This transcription served as the foundation of analysis for both research questions. Deciding what to include or leave out of a transcript is influenced by the researcher's ideas about language, contexts, and interactions (Gee, 2010). Even with increasingly advanced technological tools to help, constructing transcripts involves making choices based on how the researcher's understanding of what is being communicated and the influences of that communication (Gee, 2010). This means transcripts are not simply neutral recordings; they are part of the analysis (Gee, 2010). Transcripts can be very detailed or less so, though Gee recognizes that it is usually best to start with a lot of detail while emphasizing that the level of detail does not indicate the quality of the analysis

(2010). What matters most in terms of transcription decisions is how well the transcript aligns with the goals of analysis to understand the data (Gee, 2010). For example, quality is not achieved by full inclusion of linguistic markers of each phrase—a goal that Gee makes clear is impossible to achieve given the complexity of language--but how the transcription guides understanding while addressing the research questions connected to the inquiry (2010).

Using Gee's framework (2000), I first asked how participants recognize aspects of identity within their narrations related to special education experiences as students and parents (2000). Then I used analytic questions aligned with De Fina's method of positioning analysis to focus on how broader social, political, or cultural structures influence participants' acceptance, rejection, or complication of dominant identity messages in special education (2013).

Identity Recognition

> “*In the end, we are talking about recognition as a social and political process, though, of course, one rooted in the workings of people's (fully historicized and socialized) minds” (Gee, 2000; p. 111).*

The data analysis process that connects to the first research question analyzes the participants' narratives and conversations to explore how different aspects of identity recognition are manifested. Without imposing a rigid template, Gee's conceptualization of overlapping and dynamic components of identity serves as a valuable heuristic to guide identity analysis (2000). The analytic questions associated with Gee’s theoretical lens of identity work to detect how Nature Identity (N-ID), Institution Identity (I-ID), Affinity Identity (A-ID), and Discourse Identity (D-ID) are recognized in the stories and discussions of the participants (2000). This analytic process also involved asking how these participants recognize and navigate the interplay of these identity components as seen in their stories and talk.

> *I work out my identity, in the modern sense, by making sense of, or interpreting, what it means to be a man or a woman of a certain sort, a worker or professional of a certain sort, an Anglo-American or African American of a certain sort, or moral, witty, intelligent, or fit for leadership in certain ways and not others. But I cannot make sense of anything or interpret anything without a language or other sort of representational system within which to do so (Gee, 2000; p. 112).*

Analytic Questions

The following questions were asked to analyze identity recognition according to Gee's analytic lens (2000). Note that Gee's emphasis on *combinations* of identity components, or overlapping dimensions, was apparent in a separate analytic question (2000; Gee, 1989).

- How is a Nature Identity (N-ID) recognized in these participants' stories and talk?
- How is an Institution Identity (I-ID) recognized in these participants' stories and talk?
- How is an Affinity Identity (A-ID) recognized in these participants' stories and talk?

- How is a Discourse Identity (D-ID) recognized in these participants' stories and talk?
- How do these participants recognize combinations of identity dimensions (N-ID, I-ID, A-ID, D-ID) recognized in these participants' stories and talk?

Identity Positioning

In this section, I examine the elements of identity positioning analysis used in this study, drawing from Bamberg's (2007) concept of dominant narratives as social and historical messages about what it means to be a certain kind of person. I look at how the stories and talk shared by these participants either aligned with or deviated from dominant narratives related to what it means to be in special education. This investigation is situated within dominant narratives associated with special education, analyzing positioning across three levels using De Fina's Level 3 positioning framework (2013). This analysis aims to emphasize the dynamic and evolving nature of being positioned and positioning oneself in identity narratives that are influenced by and influence the prevailing messages about the "type of person" expected in special education.

Dominant Narratives

Bamberg defines dominant narratives as taken for granted assumptions about what is considered normal, expected, or desirable in society (2007). He is careful to emphasize that dominant narratives serve an organizing function and that alignment with dominant narratives does not necessarily equal complicity to hegemonic power-knowledge systems (2007). This complexity was important to keep in mind as the study participants engaged in positioning their identities in dialogue with dominant narratives that reinforce, reject or complicate “taken for granted” understandings about what it means to be in special education.

Positioning

This study acknowledges that participants engage in identity positioning across three distinct levels within their narratives (Bamberg, 2004a; Bamberg, 2004b). First, participants position themselves vis-a-vis the characters they describe in their narrated experiences. Next, positioning takes place vis-a-vis the audience and co-narrators, as participants establish similarities or differences (Bamberg, 2004b). Lastly, narrators position themselves vis-a-vis their own identity (Bamberg, 2004b), answering a situated who-am-I question concerning how they fit within dominant narratives, which present messages to be accepted, countered, or complicated (Bamberg, 2004a).

Level 3 Positioning Analysis

This study aligns with De Fina’s argument for Level 3 position analysis being a useful *middle ground* for bridging local and macro identity positioning processes, emphasizing the inadequacy of a single narrative or fragment for this purpose (2013, p. 45). This analytic approach is used in alignment with Bamberg’s application of positioning as a dynamic interplay between “being positioned” and “positioning oneself” (Bamberg, 2004b; p. 224).

The steps of this analytic approach, as well as how Gee’s analytic lens is operationalized, are listed in the following figure outlining the model used to address both research questions (2000).

Figure 6

Data Analysis Model

Convert Transcribed Narrative Data to Stanzas

- Convert the transcribed narrative data into stanzas (Gee, 2010)

Gee’s Identity as an Analytic Lens for Education (2000)

- How is a Nature Identity (N-ID) recognized in these participants’ stories and talk?
- How is an Institution Identity (I-ID) recognized in these participants’ stories and talk?
- How is an Affinity Identity (A-ID) recognized in these participants’ stories and talk?
- How is a Discourse Identity (D-ID) recognized in these participants’ stories and talk?
- How do these participants recognize combinations of identity dimensions (N-ID, I-ID, A-ID, D-ID) recognized in these participants’ stories and talk?

De Fina’s Step 3 Positioning Analysis (2013) adapted from Bamberg (1997)

- Step 1: Identify the characters and their relational positioning in the narratives.
    - Level 1
- Step 2: Consider how the act of narrating contributes to individual and relational identity recognition.
    - Level 2
- Step 3: Examine the speaker's positioning within the interactive flow of turns in the "research situation."
    - Level 2
- Step 4: Investigate how the relation between the group (narrator and audience) is managed.
    - Level 2
- Step 5: Reflect on the narrator’s positioning vis-a-vis dominant narratives relaed to special education.
    - Level 3

Reflexivity

- Routinely reflect on personal responses, biases, and experiences that shape data interpretation throughout the data collection and analysis process.
- Actively seek feedback from peers or participants to provide clarity and transparency to findings and interpretations.
- Remain continually open to needed adjustments based on insights and feedback.

Conclusion and Discussion

- Draw conclusions on how shared stories' implications contribute to identity sensemaking.
- Draw conclusions on how positioning within broader social and cultural narratives relates to dominant, master and counter-narratives.
- Discuss the findings in relation to the existing literature on narrative positioning and identity.

Trustworthiness

To enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of the research findings, this study used member checking, analytic memoing, and peer debriefing (Creswell & Miller, 2000). How these practices are used is explained below.

Member Checking

Member checking took the form of creating opportunities for participants to clarify, counter, or further elaborate on their narratives as I understood them. The primary opportunity for member checking was built into the individual semi-structured interviews with participants but email communication was also used for member checking purposes. An example of how member checking was used is shown in how Keisha's individual interview served to provide a richer picture of her sensemaking process and the resources provided to her to make sense of her special education experiences:

Based on prior group interviews, I knew that Keisha narrated her initial belief, as an early elementary student, that she was in a special class for being "smart." It was in her individual interview that she elaborated on how her mother corrected that understanding while still affirming Keisha's identity as *the kind of student who is smart*:

Keisha:

> Right(.)I pretty much(.) I mean(.) like all that stuff (.) like I still remember it
> getting whoopins with the teacher and(.)you know(.)getting picked on and stuff(.)
> um but just like I was telling you before
> like I thought I was in a special class
> like you know what I'm saying?
> For being smart <short laugh/exhalation>that's what I THOUGHT(.)yeah
> when I was little until my mama told me why I was in a(.)in a special class(.)
> you know um I was(.)I was SMART but I wasn't in the smart people class <laugh> (3220-3225).

Memoing

Memoing techniques were used to establish an ongoing practice of responding to reflexive prompts about my relationship to the study and the data sources the participants and I were co-constructing (Birks, et al., 2008). I also routinely wrote analytic memos to guide the process of being intentional about thoughts, feelings, and any additional questions and wonderings about my interactions with participants' experiences throughout the process of analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2018).

Reflexive Memos

Though I share some identity characteristics and experiences with my participants, I wanted to ensure I did not assume *sameness* in a context where, as a researcher, I was positioned in a place of perceived and material power (Phillips et al., 2024, Raheim et al., 2016). I adapted reflexive questions designed to ethically honor the role of co-constructor of “storied data” (Phillips et al., 2024; p.1) through presence, representation, and form (Phillips et al., 2024) to use as reflexive prompts:

- How am I feeling/sensing what is going on here? (presence)
- How am I re-presenting the participant in ways that are mindful of tensions and alignments with my own experiences? (representation)
- How am I respectfully communicating the contributions of the participants in ways that honor their experiences and reach the audiences who will benefit? (form)

Word documents, Notes application, and analog index cards were used to memo, or make notes, related to the overlapping and contrasting identity experiences as well as related feelings, opinions, preferences, and reactions associated with every component of the study (Pope & Shelton, 2023).

Analytic Memos

Analytic memos were used throughout the earliest process of data analysis to provide ongoing chances for member validation and increased data credibility, aligning with Merriam &Merriam's (2009) concept of trustworthiness. These memos were added to every iteration of my transcribed interview data as well as emailed questions, comments, and clarifications. This analytic memoing process allowed me to detect and make sense of tensions, discrepancies, affirmations, and wonderings resulting from participants' contributions in a variety of data collection contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2018).

Peer Debriefing

As the data collection and initial analysis for this study began, I was enrolled in a weekly narrative research seminar where I was able to bring recruitment protocols, troubleshoot barriers to recruitment, and receive feedback related to initial data collection processes. This form of peer debriefing (Creswell, 2007) served as a source of feedback from knowledgeable peers who operated outside special education research contexts. Being able to respond to questions about my research design and analytic focus to an audience with little background knowledge helped refine my approach. As I continued the analytic process, I was able to connect to AERA's Narrative SIG for continued feedback useful for analytic choices. As the iterative process of analysis and writing continued, I gained valuable in-person feedback related to my findings. This process confirmed my initial analyses while providing valuable insight into how I organized the framing and presentation of the findings.

Orientation to Findings

The following chapters describe the results of the two research questions of this study. Chapter 4 explores how identity is recognized in the narrated experiences of these participants using Gee's Identity as an Analytic Lens for Education (2000). Chapter 5 provides the results of De Fina's refinement of Bamberg's positioning analysis (2013) to show how these participants engaged in identity positioning vis-à-vis dominant narratives related to special education while sharing stories and talk about their experiences as former students and current parents.

The findings of this study broadly implicate challenges faced by participants in the special education system regarding their assigned educational disability identity. The participants felt that the system lacked adequate resources to help them understand and cope with their identities. Some identities were perceived as stigmatized, making them difficult to name or discuss openly. However, participants expressed relief and hope regarding their children's ability to make sense of their identities. This optimism was often attributed to the participants' role as identity agents, or adults intentionally modeling behavior, providing support and guidance to children facing similar identity-related challenges (Schachter & Ventura, 2008).

Findings related to identity positioning in special education connect a complex process of negotiation with dominant identity narratives. Each participant found silences related to special education stigmatizing. How participants complicated dominant narratives about being in special education varied in how they talked about bullying, the hierarchical ranking of disability labels, and the possibility of disability being a valued social identity for themselves or their children. These participants’ stories and talk shared a general alignment with a dominant narrative that recognized special education services are necessary for their children identified with educational disabilities. They complicated these identity messages by positioning *being the kind of student in special education* within a narrative that counters dominant, stigmatized messages of silence. This interactive identity sensemaking process worked as an ongoing conversation between the stories they shared in this study and the dominant narrative about special education being a place for particular kinds of special education students to escape through overcoming internally situated impairments through individual effort. These messages correspond with how functional impairment models of disability place recognized deficits within students identified with educational disability vis-à-vis positioning special education as a place that is both possible and desirable to "get out of" (J.B., 3906).

Chapter 4: Identity Recognition as an Analytic Lens for (Special) Education

"The modern need for recognition, since it is an attempt to create achieved D(iscourse) identities, places a particular importance on discourse and dialogue. I work out my identity, in the modern sense, by making sense of, or interpreting, what it means to be a man or a woman of a certain sort, a worker or professional of a certain sort, an Anglo-American or African American of a certain sort, or moral, witty, intelligent, or fit for leadership in certain ways and not others. But I cannot make sense of anything or interpret anything without a language or other sort of representational system within which to do so"

(Gee, 2000; p. 113).

This chapter presents findings from the first of two research questions aiming to explore identity sensemaking processes in special education by asking: How are identities recognized in the stories and talk of adults who were in special education classes and are now parents of children identified with educational disabilities? The purpose of analyzing these findings through an analytic lens of identity in education (Gee, 2000) is to understand how identity is recognized in these participants' narrations. These findings are drawn primarily from stories and the discussions about those stories elicited from Story Circle group sessions and individual interview data. These data were supported by analytic memos and email exchanges with participants, in addition to a comprehensive examination of video-recorded interviews.

This chapter begins with narrative portraits (Connor, 2008; Mueller, 2019) of each participant including myself. Including my contributions to the stories and talk shared within the study makes clear that reciprocal shaping takes place in researcher and interviewer roles as well as for research participants (Abell, et al., 2006) while creating and communicating rich, trustworthy data rooted in an ethical framework that values transparency and reflexivity.

Each participant's narrative portraits will be followed by samples of the narrated experiences they shared as part of Story Circle and individual interviews. These narrations are intended, as much as possible, to align with "small story" models (Bamberg & Georgakoupoulou, 2008) designed to create rich opportunities for interviews to elicit stories and talk useful for identity analysis. The results of analysis using Gee's analytic lens will follow the sample narrations.

The portraits and narrations of myself, Maureen, Keisha, J.B., John, and Tiffany are supported by a deeper exploration of the interplay of Gee's analytic lens (2000) and the presented narrative data from each participant. These results present how Gee's analytic lens recognizes states located within individuals; positions assigned through authorities; practices and allegiances actively shared; and ascribed or achieved traits freely recognized within their stories and talk. These dimensions, nature (N-identity), institution (I-identity), affinity (A-identity) or discourse (D-identity), are called NIAD throughout the rest of the chapter. The process of identity analysis will provide rich descriptions of the results of this analytic process aimed at detecting identity recognition in these participants' stories and talk.

Tracey: Let Pete Be With His Friends/You Stay With Yours

And like I said
I was first identified for learning disability in math
I'd go there for different computer game times
and different ways of sort of practicing those basic skills
but on my way sort of back and forth from the main building to this resource trailer
I would see these kids that were lined up to go to the OTHER trailer

> so I thought of it as the All Day Kids trailer
> they were there all day you know?
> and there was one guy there
> one little kid about my age
> and for the purpose of this story I'll call him Pete
> who was very friendly and he knew my name was Tracey
> Tracey and Pete
> Pete and I were buddies
> but my special education teacher said
> “Hey you shouldn't be talking with Pete
> let Pete be with HIS friends
> you stay with yours” (346-352)

I am a 49-year-old white woman with K-12 U.S. public school special education experiences as a student. I would not qualify for the study inclusion criteria for having children who receive special education services since my adolescent and young adult children did not qualify for special educational services or 504 plans. They have similar identified disabilities to mine which all fall under the broad umbrella category of neurodivergence (Botha et al., 2024) but have not, or did not, warrant(ed) specialized instruction or accommodations based on educational evaluation.

I first started receiving *exceptional student services* (Florida House of Representatives, 2010) as a hyperlexic (Silberburg & Silberburg, 1971) kindergartner identified as *gifted* in Florida public schools in 1980. In the first grade, I was identified with specific learning disabilities (LD). By 5th grade, I was then identified as what Florida termed “Emotionally Handicapped” or “EH” (Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services, 2010). Throughout middle school, I attended special education resource classes for both LD and what is now considered EH, or what is since known as Emotional Disturbance (ED). Continuing into high school, I received specialized instruction for goals related to deficits in math computation and organization. Finally, I graduated with a regular high school diploma in 1992.

After high school, I went to community college where I received accommodations based on my identified educational disabilities. Slowly, I chipped away at the teacher education requirements for special education, earning a Master of Arts in Teaching at 39 years old. In May 2020, I transitioned from teaching young students identified with educational disabilities related to behavior to a full-time Ph.D. program studying special education. Until the end of my first semester of my doctoral program, I did not self-identify as a person with a disability or self-categorize my identified educational disabilities as impairments recognized as disabilities. Before this shift, I self-identified as the kind of person who was in special education for *extra help*. I did not connect that help to disability status, disability identity, or disability community.

The following narrative excerpt is set within the first round of the study's first Story Circle session. I am mindful of the fact that I share some lived experiences with the participants of this study but not all. Even sharing similar disabilities (such as ADHD) or special education placements (such as LD) should not lull insider-researchers such as myself into complacency regarding a perceived insider status (Sheldon, 2017).

It Was Like/If You Work Hard Enough/You Don't Have to Be in This Trailer

> And it wasn't about me not being disruptive or not letting Pete focus
> the way I remember it
> it was definitely an attitude of like
> "Hey(.)don't be friends with Pete"
> and the same teacher was talking all the time about how
> "YOU can get out of special education"
> it was like(.)"If you work hard enough
> you don't have to be in this trailer"
> which has always stuck with me

> because I didn't get out
> I stayed in special education until high school graduation
> but that sort of attitude that that teacher had was sort of like
> I remember her saying
> “Hey you can get out you can get out” (353-361).

The Kind of Person Who Didn’t Get Out.

The narrated experience I shared as a type of starter at the first Story Circle session centered around identity messages that were explicitly and implicitly communicated to me about *escaping* special education. As evident in my narration, my first special education teacher communicated identity messages about the *kind of special education student* I was. This teacher ascribed the D-identity to me, clearly communicated through: “You can get out of special education/if you work hard enough” (359-360). This messaging conveys minimal connection to N-identity, while recognizing the ascribed N-identity as escapable through the D-identity message of “you can get out.” She wanted me to actively pursue this D-identity through an achieved status of *the kind of person who can get out of special education*. According to D-identity recognized traits of the *kind of person who can get out of special education*, I “shouldn’t be talking to Pete.” When thinking of A-identities as Gee describes them as freely chosen (2000), choosing to talk to Pete would be more of a trait than an active experience shared with similar group members (2000) since at 7, I was not aware of our shared experiences enough to agentively align our identity experiences as similar enough to be considered members of the same affinity group. The D-identity message that was transmitted to me as *everybody knows* that recognition as the kind of special education student who could escape special education trailers entirely and this was something that I should want to do. My ability to achieve this escapee status through unlearning traits identified with disabilities that are *less-apparent* (Forber-Pratt, et al., 2021) depending on time and context recognized as fundamentally different from Pete's D-identity where his traits marking him as a special education student would always be recognized. What was communicated to me was that this escape was possible, if only I would camouflage traits that marked me as the kind of student who was in special education. Pete would always be recognized with those traits.

Maureen: It Was Almost Like a PTSD IEP Process

> I definitely think my special education experience
> really(.)
> well (.)
> genetically
> I feel like a lot of learning disabilities are genetic
> and so
> I kind of just assumed
> I was going to have a kid with something similar to me
> and it definitely(.)the first few years when my son had his IEP
> it was almost like a PTSD IEP process
> I dreaded it
> I knew I was going to cry
> hearing deficits that are similar to yours
> but knowing that he's a different human being
> and different experience
> and not having
> well fighting for things
> but not really fighting for
> I don't know
> just how different my education experience was than his
> in many different ways
> good and bad and how that took a lot of(.)process to get where we are right now
> where he's on a good track(.)
> it was a lot for me AND him (55-68)

Among the five participants, Maureen stands out as the most fluent speaker of disability justice vocabulary, aligning with her expertise in special education structures and laws. Maureen, a 46-year-old white woman, parents two children with disabilities.

Her son, 13, has had an IEP since 1st grade, qualifying for services under the Other Health Impairment category, with goals focusing on reading, writing, and executive functioning. Maureen herself was identified with a speech delay as a child and later with learning disabilities in reading. In middle school, she was diagnosed with ADHD. When asked if she identifies as a person with a disability/disabled person, Maureen said that she does.

Maureen is an experienced early childhood educator who now runs a preschool out of her home. She specifies that it is an outdoor preschool designed to be beneficial for all young children and emphasizes the importance of this kind of preschool for students who are or would be identified with disabilities such as ADHD. When talking about her experiences in and out of public schools amid the painful process of being identified with educational disabilities and special services, her mother plays a central figure in her special education story. Her mother was so frustrated with the experience of navigating byzantine structure of accessing special education services and support for Maureen that she returned to college to become certified in special education when Maureen was a child. Maureen describes how “disability community is kind of like ingrained” (2436-2437) into her identity via work experiences as a care provider for disabled adults and children as she “raw dogged” her way through the bachelor’s degree she earned at 38 (1776). Maureen talks about how those ingrained experiences, as someone who was both a helper and one who was helped, allowed her to make sense of disability for herself and her family even though she wishes she had positive disability identity resources provided as a student in special education.

The Kind of Person Who Likes to Talk About Disability

> I like to talk about my disability
> and how him and I have similar thought processes
> and how we see the world
> and bigger pictures
> and not everybody sees things like the big picture
> some people have different viewpoints
> and have been through different things
> and that's really hard for him to think about sometimes (2158-2162)

Maureen is comfortable talking about her identity as a disabled and neurodivergent parent of neurodivergent children. Maureen's stories and talk connected to all NIAD identity dimensions—Nature (N-Identity), Institution (I-Identity), Affinity (A-Identity) and Discourse (D-Identity). Maureen recognizes natural forces in terms of a genetic link to her special education experiences both as a student and parent--"I definitely think/my special education experience really/well genetically/I feel like a lot of learning disabilities are genetic/and so I kind of just assumed I was going to have a kid with something similar to me." From an I-Identity standpoint, she positions herself as an expert in the world of special education based on multiple institutional assignments. Maureen was assigned special education status as a child. This assignment was accomplished through hard-fought effort on behalf of Maureen's highly motivated and well-resourced mother. Spurred to action by Maureen's schooling experience, her mother returned to school to get certified in special education when Maureen was in elementary school.

The reflections found in Maureen's narrations connect to an affinity with disability community practices and experiences. Gee emphasizes that A-identities are experienced through actively chosen shared practices with other members of an identity group, I am aligning her "following on social media" and learning "all kinds of interesting things" from/with members of groups who self-identify as disabled and/or divergent as shared practices. Her interest in topics such as "disability pride, autism awareness, ADD awareness" connects to this community as a secondary marker of A-identity. As the discussion of these results continues, Maureen's comfort in using language that explicitly aligns with an A-identity allegiance will be further explored especially when compared to the other participants in the cohort.

Maureen grapples with a D-identity of understanding those who are reluctant to seek special education services for their children when she talks about how she both does and does not know why people would avoid seeking an IEP for their child: "And I don't understand when people don't want to get an IEP/because to me an IEP is help for your kids/but knowing so many have stigma about it/makes a lot of people not want to get it (73-75). The recognized trait here is an understanding of ambivalence. Maureen talks about not understanding how other parents want to avoid seeking an IEP for her children because—to her—she associates an IEP with accessing help for her children. She tempers her initial lack of understanding at how someone could leave "help" on the table, so to speak, with a broader sense of knowing that stigma is assigned to the D-identity of "the kind of person who has traits recognized as needing an IEP to get help."

Keisha: I WAS Smart/But I Wasn't In the Smart People Class

I still remember it
like getting whoopins with the teacher and
you know getting picked on and stuff
but just like I was telling you before
like I thought that I was in a special class?
you know what I'm saying?
for being smart?
that's what I thought
yeah
when I was little
until my mama told me why I was in a special class

> you know?
> I WAS smart
> but I wasn't in the smart people class (3260-3265*)*.

Keisha is a 46-year-old Black woman who is parenting a 5-year-old daughter who currently receiving services in early childhood special education for behavior. Keisha also received special education services in elementary school for behavior. Her family history of behavior problems—

> "I mean/we have a family full of people with behavior issues/and they've grown up like that/and they still got their issues and they get in trouble/some of 'em just sit in the house and just watch tv/don't work/don't do nothing" (1113-1114)

--fuels her desire to continue special education services for her daughter as she transitions to kindergarten. The stories of her experiences as a student are marked with shame, confusion, stigma, and intentionally maintaining distance and silences related to being in special education. Though she was only in separate classes focused on IEP goals related to behavior for two years in elementary school, the experience affected her in that she still—in contrast to Maureen—was reluctant to talk about her time in special education.

Even though the topic of special education is not something that Keisha feels comfortable talking about generally, she knows that she needs to be open to talking about special education with her daughter. When asked as part of the demographic questions if she self-identifies as being disabled/having a disability, Keisha says, "I mean I personally myself I do" (3244).

At the close of the first Story Circle session, Keisha expressed gratitude for having the opportunity to connect with others who have had experiences that may help her advocate for her daughter’s continued services into kindergarten. She shares that for her, “it seems like God is always on time/because this circle may be just what I need” to provide a space to vent frustration and network with others who have had similar parenting experiences (926-927).

The Kind of Person Who Wants Something Better for Her Daughter

> Okay so when I'm talking to other people
> I mean as an adult
> I don't really talk about my special education
> I mean it was when I was in elementary
> it was a long time ago
> but it was something that
> I didn't feel too comfortable talking about
> and I mean I STILL don't
> the only person I really have talked to about it is my mom about it
> and I mean he (scammer talked about bullying) just remind me of all the stuff that
> I went through
> when I was in the class or whatever
> I was separated like from the rest of the school
> I mean I felt different
> I'm getting picked on all the time and stuff like that
> I mean <laugh>
> that's why I don't(.)
> I put that stuff behind me
> and don't wanna talk about it
> but with my daughter
> I gotta communicate more when it comes to that
> ‘cause I don't want her to go through the same thing that I went through
> growing up(1573-1582).

Keisha’s stories focused on how she worried about her daughter’s behavior. Keisha described identity experiences she shares with her mother, extended family, and daughter. This concern was the foundation of her Story Circle and individual interview contributions as she emphasized how she wants better for her daughter. Her work towards that goal involves advocating for continued services for her daughter, advocating for the care she wants her daughter to continue to receive, care that she felt both helped her and didn't help her enough, care that she sees as a vital missing link in the stories of her family members with behavioral problems. She also recognized the goal for her daughter to have a better experience as a *behavior student* than she did was marked with a tension. Keisha does not like to talk about her time in special education. She realized that talking about it would help her daughter. Keisha would prefer to remain silent about her experiences in special education. She knows that silence would impact her daughter's special education experience.

Keisha's narrations recognized an N-identity, or a family history, of behavioral problems. She is conflicted about connections to an N-identity state/status of family members with behavior problems and energized by the recognition that she needs to act as an identity agent for her daughter. She recognized that intentionally modeling what it means to be the *kind of person who is in special education who knows what's going on* requires her to speak more directly about her special education experiences.

Keisha also navigated past and current dimensions of I-identity in her exasperated storytelling. Keisha narrated her placement as a special education in "a small classroom" with no context for understanding how or if she fit in with other students. Her unsupported understanding of her assigned status placement in this classroom is recognized in the intertwined I-identities ("I really felt awkward") and D-identities ("I really wasn't supposed to be in the class."). These dimensions combined in her stories of advocating for her daughter as she navigates messages saying that her daughter does not fit within I-identities of the kind of student assigned to special education students because she does not possess D-identity traits expected from a special education student.

Gee makes clear that A-identities are required to be optional and freely chosen; no one can force a person to engage in practices that mark groups and spaces as social affinity spaces (2000). The exchanges between Keisha and Maureen about the need for community connection with other (frustrated) parents working to advocate for adequate special education services is the nearest evidence for possible practices that recognize an affinity, or shared practices, with *advocate mothers*. Gee uses adults with ADHD who connect to other "adult ADHDers" to engage in advocacy and lifestyle support as recognized A-identities (2000). Based on this factor, the sense of desperation Keisha feels about working to ensure the help her daughter needs continue into kindergarten complicates a recognition of A-identity as it is not recognized as an optional and freely as described in Gee's framing of affinity groups (2000).

Through further D-identity recognition, she recognized with frustration that her daughter's identified intelligence is marking her as someone who is not the kind of student who needs special education: "I mean, my baby only been in that school for a few months/and you're going to drop her already/because you think that she's too smart in class and this and that/but she's not in there because she's supposed to be not smart/she's in there because of her behavior (1189-1191). Here the D-identity recognition dimension again overlapped with I-identity with Keisha attempts to counter messages conveyed about "the kind of person who receives special education services" that her daughter being recognized as smart means that she should be dismissed from special education before she transitions to kindergarten.

J.B.: I Really Avoided It/I Didn't Want to Talk About It

> No because I don't wanna go off on a tangent
> but I know that(.)

specifically
as a child
as a student myself
whenever I was a student
I REALLY avoided it.
I didn't wanna talk about it
but as an adult now
it's more of a bridge?
especially having been in special education as a child
but also the bridge of having a child within special education
so being able to bridge gaps both ways (1526-1531)

During the demographic question portion of his individual interview, when asked about disability identity, J.B. did not self-identify as a person with disabilities/disabled person: “Not necessarily, no” (3900). J.B. is a 43-year-old white man who is parenting 2 children, 10- and 13-year-old sons, with IEPs and a 16-year-old son with a 504 plan. J.B. is a fluent speaker of *special education-ese*. He identified strongly as a teacher of students with disabilities as well as someone who shares experiences with both his students and their parents, though his connection to his students’ parenting experiences sometimes exists in tension with his perception of his students’ parents and guardians. J.B. recognized his unique status as a special educator with experiences as a special education student and a parent of students in special education.

Especially during his semi-structured interview session, J.B. referred frequently to his wife as indispensable for his family’s ongoing work to create sustainable systems of support for their children. In his stories that connect to his childhood experiences as a special education student, he credited his mother as a primary reason he was able to access the opportunities he was able to get as part of his public school experience. He referenced these models of family support frequently during the individual interview sessions when he talked about the differences and similarities between him and his wife and other families who have children in special education. J.B. is invested in stories of advocacy, support, and overcoming struggles associated, or perhaps conflated, with disability. When listing the roles he has in the realm of education as a former special education student, he claimed disability in the past tense: “I've taught regular ed English and I had a disability in English which is weird” (3986).

Throughout the study, J.B. was eager to please. He prefaced his stories with concerns about how what he talked about would connect to the topic at hand:

> Do you want like a specific forinstance? Like story like?
> Like whenever I was in second grade?
> I picked up a chair and threw it across the room?
> and got kicked out of school and had to go to private school for two years?
> because I hated my classroom because I kept getting pulled out and I missed all the specials?
> all the parties, all the fun stuff?
> And(.)and(.)the kids in there knew that I was different
> you know what I mean?
> and so(.)
> you know something like that? <laugh>
> stuff like that? Or (TKM: If you're asking=)
> =there's just so many
> yeah that's what(.)
> it happened to me and then you know
> that it(.)that's why you know I am(.)again
> so passionate about it
> or that I was stuck in a class in middle school
> with a bunch of kids that had behaviors
> they didn't wanna learn?
> all they ever did was get kicked outta class
> I was the only one in there that wanted to learn
> but the teacher never taught me anything (1906-1915)

J.B. ended his Story Circle rotations and conversational turns asking if what he shared related to what I wanted to hear about or connected to what he hoped made sense for my understanding and the study’s purpose. He repeatedly expressed gratitude in our emailed interactions as we attempt to arrange interview times that work for his busy schedule. J.B. attributed his gratitude to having a chance for his story to potentially make a difference in the field of special education and for students like him, his children, and the children he teaches.

The Kind of Person Who Tells His Kids and Students to Be Proud

> I’d tell him to be proud of it
> dang it
> don't hide from it
> dang it <laugh>
> No you know
> and I'm sensitive to it too
> and I'm very blessed that my son goes to my school
> he's not in any of my classes
> but I know his learning specialist
> I know his case manager and so it's like
> well you know don't(.)don't shy away from asking
> you know what I mean?
> “Dude ASK
> Be the one who asks questions in your regular classes
> Be the one who-who stands up and says
> I don't understand(.)I need help”
> um I don't I don't
> I don't want him to put himself in a situation where he's UNCOMFORTABLE
> but you know that going back
> I wish I was more of an advocate for myself
> I don't know
> I want to empower my child to
> to know that
> “Hey I didn't have(.)
> there were opportunities that I should have said
> I don't want to take that math class.I wanna take this math class instead or
> I wanna learn this but that means I need to not be pulled out during this” <laugh>
> you know what I mean?
> And do it in a respectful way
> but so I want to empower my child
> and I have

> I've told him you know at the end of the day
> “Dude
> we need to know what you need
> we can guess all day long
> but unless you start telling us how we can support you better” or
> ‘This isn't working’
> the better the opportunities are gonna be for you”
> and we've really seen a lot of positives out of that
> and so um just encouraging my son and my daughter to say
> “Yeah I need a little bit of extra time
> I need(.)these are the accommodations I have” (1764-1781).

J.B. wished he had been taught to be a better self-advocate for himself and tries his best to make sure that his children know how to be effective self-advocates. J.B.'s narratives predominantly acknowledged an I-identity, reflecting his strong commitment to the frameworks of special education and his belief that these frameworks can uphold the rights and needs that he felt were not adequately addressed during his own time in special education. He recognized that his alignment with an I-identity positions him as an insider within special education positively impacts his son. J.B, spoke about how he uses his experiences and expertise to explicitly teach self-advocacy skills to his children.

When asked to elaborate on institutional and discursive barriers commonly experienced by people identified with disabilities as they seek protected accommodations, J.B. acknowledged the challenge of striking a pitch-perfect balance for a functional self-advocacy identity. This balance aims for D-identity recognition by the institution as being the kind of student/parent who is appropriately *expressing needs* versus an ascribed D-identity of being recognized as *needy*. J.B. emphasized the challenging nuances of advocating without appearing needy to the point of having motivations for seeking accommodations questioned and acknowledged how difficult it can be to achieve this institutionally affirmed identity as a student attempting to self-advocate.

> "If I struggled with social cues in the sense of/that's enough move on/ then
> I would be seen as someone who's weird/someone who is you know/Um
> what are your motives behind this?" (4044-4048).

This recognition of the nuance involved aligns with I- and D-identities connected to being "the kind of person who can self-advocate."

Overlapping NIAD dimensions were evident in J.B.'s narration of a particular special education experience familiar to him as a student, parent, and teacher: accessing classes that are interesting or useful while still getting the specialized instruction aimed at individualized learning goals. The primary identity dimensions apparent in J.B's narrations related to navigating these scheduling barriers and aligned with I-identity and D-identity positions and traits. J.B. spoke at length about how special education classes often occupy valuable time slots that could otherwise be filled with arts, language or higher-level math classes. J.B. briefly recognized that N-identity dimensions shape the possibilities for students, unlike him or his children, students who are discursively recognized and institutionally assigned with ascribed "significant disability" (4344). Institutional barriers showed up in his retrospective storytelling about the frustration of navigating inaccessible coursework options for/as students identified as needing special educational services. However, his stories and talk still emphasized the importance of sharing with his special education students that they must escape the need for particular (special education) classes if they want full access to curricular options.

John: How Was It Just Glossed Over That They Were a Special Needs Student?

> It was for one of my college classes a couple years ago
> I started looking up like historical figures that are believed
> that were known or believed to have been dyslexic
> or had some other learning disability
> and the list is huge for people who either at the time
> or certainly NOW
> couldn't go through a school system without some sort of special(.)
> without some sort of help accommodating their needs
> and uh a lot of 'em are like
> there were lots of names I recognized
> from like the people who equations in physics are named after
> like the list just went on and on and I'm like why? <small head shake>
> In no(...)like I've heard stories of these people my whole LIFE
> How was it just glossed over that they were a special needs student? (1655-1669).

John, a 43-year-old white man, is parenting a 20-year-old son who received special education services in K-12 public schools and is currently receiving disability services accommodations in college for learning disabilities. When asked if he identified as a person with a disability or a disabled person during the demographic interview, John said, “Yes.” (4750). John's stories almost always placed his special education experience in comparison with either more significantly impacted peers or his parents' experiences in schools that were even more under-resourced and oppressive, well before IDEA went into effect. John described how even if IEPs "were a thing" (1113) in other schools at the time, in the low-income, rural, and isolated school he attended, the basic processes of special education were surely not up to regulation. Unlike J.B.--who was fluent in institutional discourses (Gee, 1998) related to special education--in both group and individual interviews, John spoke around special education frameworks and vocabulary. His stories mainly communicated experiences of confusion, dismay, and denial that he saw as nearly unavoidable for students and families in under-resourced rural schools and districts. His stories also focused on his dismay with what he perceived as the structural institutional barriers he located at the root of his negative experiences.

When sharing experiences as a parent of a student identified with learning disabilities, he talked about how different things seemed to be for his son and for families currently experiencing the special education system. He compared this perceived positive change to his experience as a special education student who was given no information about his educational disability other than deficit messages. In his individual interview, John explained how he developed an understanding of his disability identity while seeking treatment for a neurobehavioral disability upon entering community college as an adult. It was there that he learned of historical figures whom he now believes may have had similar behavioral or learning disabilities. During both group story-sharing sessions and his individual interview, he expressed how learning about these influential scholars and historical figures would have profoundly impacted him as a student who learned similarly.

The Kind of Person Who Recognizes When the Thing is Left Out

> Like when the thing is left out of(.)
> these people
> that would you know likely fail these classes that we're in
> you know they did more for this field than anyone else in history
> it's always like
> like when that's left out
> all that's left over is like
> well(.)you should just work HARDER
> and if you're failing at this you(.)
> “Have you considered working harder?” (4835-4839)

John was both upset and unsurprised that his time in special education failed to represent prominent scholars and scientists who may have learned in similar ways to him, whom he could have looked up to. John’s stories recognized the power of I-identity being assigned to students identified with educational disabilities without the support of identity resources to connect students to shared practices and experiences associated with disability community, or A-identity. An A-identity is recognized in John’s retrospective bewilderment that there were so many rich identity resources that were inaccessible to him as a student. He cited the stories told to him by his parents, particularly his father who was made by his teachers to sit on his left hand until he became conditioned to using his right hand, that recognized a D-identity that maintained that school was a place that you should expect to be an unpleasant place where there was no recourse to change learning conditions:

> “At the end of the day/the stories that were told to me/ Dad just had to deal
> with whatever situation school had for him/and there wasn't really any
> route for self-advocacy to have helped him” (4810-4812).

John wondered how the information he found out in college about highly regarded scientists who learned in ways considered atypical, potentially in ways that would now be recognized by rational individuals as traits associated with learning disabilities or other neuro divergencies, could have been kept from students receiving special education services. “How was it just glossed over that they were a special needs student?” (1669)

When John answered a question about how he supported his son in ways that his parents were not able to support him, he drew from A-identity to share experiences that were useful to him as a college student wanting to use every tool at his disposal to access learning. He responded with

> "I was able to encourage <my son> to use the resources available to him/in EVERY way/both the ones that are specifically for like/specifically special education related/but also just things like office hours/that professors would have regularly (4943-4948).

John was able to act as an identity agent for his son, to provide a disability community of at least one person who could model what it was like for a person with a learning disability to access helpful support.

Tiffany: So I Always See Myself Helping Those in Need

Tiffany is 35-year-old multiracial— "mixed with Black and white" (2970)—woman parenting two children with educational disabilities. Tiffany works in the public school system as a paraprofessional and identifies strongly as a helper to people with disabilities, in and out of the classroom. Tiffany has two girls in the second and fifth grade. Her younger daughter has had an IEP since preschool while her older daughter qualified for services last year. Tiffany and her younger daughter both have neurofibromatosis. Tiffany's stories focused on the hardships she faced as a student who was bullied for being in special education and how she can provide support to others with disabilities—even though she does not necessarily know what the best answer to provide is when asked if she has a disability: I do have a disability/but I don't like I don't label myself or go get SSI for it/so I don't know how that would categorize" (3030-3033).

"Both of my kids are/both of my kids are IEP/I have a fifth grader and a second grader/but my fifth grader is the one that just recently last year got uh IEP uh credentials/but my second grader has had it 'cause of her uh neurofibromatosis/her learning disability and a lot more goes into that. But she has had it/uh services since uh

Head Start.” (2919-2921). Tiffany and her younger daughter both have neurofibromatosis, a genetic condition that creates visible spots and growths, impairs vision, and impacts learning and behavior (Le & Bedocs, 2024). Tiffany’s stories focused on how she can provide identity resources to her daughter that her mother could not give her. Tiffany works in the public school system as a paraprofessional and identified strongly as a helper to “special” kids.

The Kind of Person Who Just Always Sees Herself Helping

> Like me
> I'm legally blind in my right eye
> so I don't really drive and my anxiety gets too high
> so I don't feel comfortable driving
> So we
> me and my girls
> we take the city bus
> I've been
> I'm 35 and I've been taking the bus since I've been 13.
> Tracey: mm-Hmm. <affirmative>
> But I see myself even on the city bus helping the elderly
> like getting on the bus
> helping the blind get on the bus
> the people in the wheelchair
> the walker
> so I always see myself helping those in need
> I've been working with kids since I've been 14
> I got my first job as the snack lady
> cause I, you know, legal age
> I couldn't actually work with kids yet until I turned 16(.)15
> so I was the snack lady
> So I was able to provide the snacks and volunteer in a classroom that had an older staff member in there
> but still getting paid.
> So I first got my job and since I've been 14
> and ever since then
> I've been working with kids
> but I see my heart and just the joy in me is when I helped those

> you know that needed more
> that are incapable of doing stuff on their own
> like the blind the wheelchair the autistic
> the autism kids
> like there was this one that got
> was getting bullied in Walmart
> like this kid was making fun of him
> and you
> I could just look at him and tell that he was like on the spectrum
> so I was like
> and my kids wasn't with me
> I was on my own
> usually that never happens
> but they was at school and I was like
> “Why not just leave him alone? You can tell he's clearly not there”
> ’cause he was like, oh, you missed the bus
> And then the kid flipped out like
> oh my gosh
> and started cussing
> at that point you feel
> that wasn't the
> that's not a kid to pick on==
> Tracey: ==yeah==
> and then like from that moment I was like okay
> I feel like maybe I should try to reapply again
> And then it turns out that actual kid that I helped went to
> (redacted) High that same year that I got the job
> Wow (3064-3075)

Tiffany told stories that centrally recognized a D-identity as helper. Even beyond sharing experiences and practices related to her disability or being in special education, the trait of “always seeing myself helping” (3058) shaped how Tiffany recognized her identities as former student, current parent, paraprofessional, and generally helpful person to “those in need” (3058). She recognized this D-identity as an achievement that is sparked and sustained by innate traits that drive her to help those she considers unable to help themselves.

Tiffany's stories reflect a D-identity centered on being a helper, shaping how she viewed herself as a former student, current parent, and paraprofessional. She saw her helper identity as an achievement driven by her traits predisposing her to assist those in need. This D-identity also supports her role as a paraprofessional, drawing from her experiences in special education. This identity is reinforced by recognizing the importance of her contributions as a paraprofessional. Notably, she narrated traits associated with being an identity agent while conveying messages to her students that emphasized their ability to break free from being recognized through D-identity traits of a "special needs" student. This recognition exists in tension with how Tiffany described how she serves as an identity agent for her daughter, emphasizing the normalization of differences.

This ability to draw from similar lived experiences with disability is also recognized in how she talks about being able to serve as an identity agent for her daughter with the same hereditary condition. This recognition overlaps with an N-identity as well. Tiffany located disability within her younger daughters and her shared genetic differences in her narrated explanation that everyone is “born different” (3105). Her task as an identity agent shifts when she talked about being “labeled as a special need kid” (3088) to her students. This shift is evident as a D-identity in her shared narratives about how she talks with these students to convey identity messages related to their ability to shed educational disability labels.

Conclusion

A complex interplay of I- and D-identity messages in special education are recognized as dimensions of the *kind of person who is in special education* in the narratives shared by these former students and current parents with special education experiences. These narratives contain identity messages about self-advocacy, community connection, and institutional barriers that shape understandings of self. The stories and talk analyzed in this chapter implicate understandings of special education as an escape route and disability as a hierarchy, highlighting the importance of expanding discourses normalizing disability as an expected way of being human at school and in the broader community. These shared experiences underscore the importance of amplifying personal experiences of dis/ability and difference, recognizing the power and potential of institutional affirmation/negation of identities marked as requiring special education, the presence and quality of identity messages affirming educational disability as an expected “kind of person” in schools and the broader community, and the power of affinity spaces that nurture discourse and dialogue about disability being another way of being human.

Further analysis will position the identities of these participants as they accept, reject, or complicate dominant narratives in their local talk. This chapter explored the experiences and perspectives that shaped identity recognition for these former students and current parents to amplify the perspectives of former students and current parents with special education experiences. Using this analytic lens of identity recognition, the stories and talk shared in online Story Circles and individual semi-structured interviews focused on the identity sensemaking question, "Who am I?" in the context of special education. This exploration of sensemaking processes will continue as the broad question "How do I (Mis)Fit Within Dominant Narratives of Special Education?" is addressed through Level 3 positioning analysis.

Chapter 5: Identity Positioning in Interaction with Dominant Narratives

In a general sense, the use of the term master narrative, also called dominant or capital- D discourses, goes back to the assumption of the necessity for a horizon or background against which human sense-making becomes possible.

(Bamberg & Wipf, 2020; p. 77)

This chapter presents the results of a positioning analysis of the stories and talk shared by adults with experiences of special education as both students and parents. It focuses on how these participants engaged in dynamic processes of identity positioning involving interactional engagement with fitting and misfitting into dominant narratives (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Garland-Thomson, 2011). The dynamic nature of *mis/fitting* is explored in critical disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's seminal conceptual manuscript where fitting and misfitting is described as an engagement *between* things rather than a status *of* things (Garland-Thomson, 2011). This ongoing negotiation process between what is expected and what exists functions as a way for local talk, or narratives and discussion containing everyday discourses, to engage in constant conversation with dominant narratives (De Fina, 2013). This process of negotiating identity positions is explored through the following research question: How do adults who were special education students, and who now parent students identified with educational disabilities, accept, counter, or complicate dominant narratives through identity positioning?

The positioning analysis results are presented through four narrative excerpts in conversation with other narrative evidence drawn from these participants' contributions throughout the study. The analysis of the first excerpt contains detailed descriptions of all three levels of analysis (Bamberg, 2004b) with the remaining three examples focusing on

Level 3 analysis designed to connect local talk to dominant narratives (De Fina, 2013) related to being in special education. These excerpts were chosen to represent each participant as individual contributors and provide examples of how their stories and talk link to dominant narratives. Linking local talk with dominant narratives does not equal accepting or rejecting hegemonic narratives associated with power-knowledge systems (Bamberg, 2004a). The examples analyzed in this chapter show how these participants' narrations complicate dominant narratives as they position their special education identity experiences between discrete categories of complicity and countering.

J.B and John: I'm Just Not So Sure It Would've Helped

During our small group interview, I brought this question to the group: What do you wish you had known as a special education student? In their responses to this prompt, J.B. and John, like the other participants throughout the study, linked to dominant narratives of educational disability as a social identity commonly assumed to be unnamable, or *invisibilized* (Nusbaum & Steinborn, 2019).

J.B.: I think for me
it would've been that "You're not BROKEN"
you're not(.)"There's nothing WRONG with you
you just maybe struggle to learn in that
that type of environment or that way
and you're gonna catch up and you're gonna be FINE"
um that it(.)that "Those situations you've been put in maybe felt like"(.)
I never really felt bullied(.)but it was more of
I AVOIDED being bullied because I didn't talk about it um
Tracey: mmhm <affirmative>
J.B.: as a child you know
and now as an adult
it's more of a
I WISH I had more confidence to say "Yeah I don't know what you're talking about
as a teacher what are you talking about?
hmmm tell me more

help me out better
how how I could have been a better ADVOCATE for myself as a child
especially in middle school um
to learn higher level math.
"I get it
I get what we're doing in class but can I learn MORE?
Can-can I learn different things?
I know I have an IEP goal that wants me to do this
but can we work on higher-level math?
'cause I want to get in higher-level math in high school that's gonna allow me to go to COLLEGE."
and so I was always put on the tech prep lane
people didn't expect me to go to college
and so it was just that constant battle as I got older
and it's like
man I wish I knew when I was a child
like a smaller child
or even
not necessarily elementary
'cause my mom was a very big advocate
THAT I learned from my special ed teacher years later
that my
she said
“Your mom always made sure you had what you needed
um your mom was always like going to bat for you and making sure that she was advocating for you in meetings”
and you know and in middle school
I wish I knew that I could have been IN those meetings
I mean
I wish I knew that I could have been INVITED to those meetings
that it was MY document
it was MY paperwork
And so that's one of the things again
that I tell my students and tell my parents
um of my students
ESPECIALLY my students, “This is YOUR document
this is about YOU
I need your information
I need you to tell me what's going on
I need you to tell me this goal's gonna work(.)or it's not(.)
I mean I get that I'm the data collector(.)I'm the researcher(.)I'm the scientist here
but I need you to help me understand what you need especially as you get OLDER(.)”
And so to-to answer that question and to
or to expand on it
I really

you know
not only did I NOT wanna talk about it as a kid
but I WISH I would've KNOWN that I could have been more of an advocate for myself
um especially with adults
and so that's why I encourage it now with my students, “Hey, let me know what you need.”
or especially when not working with students with cognitive delay
but working with students with more behavior concerns
it's "I want to expand your learning. How can you help me understand that?"
and so that's kind of where I'm at with that.
John: yeah
in the beginning when you were just talking J.B
I was thinking to myself
I definitely like
I TOO wish I'd have been a better advocate for myself earlier on
Um but then
then on the OTHER hand
when I think back to the school I went to
I don't think it would've helped (laughs)
I really don't think(.)
just 'cause there were NO(.)
the resources and anything outside of just like the bare minimum classroom time just wasn't available
there wasn't other people to go to
or I don't know(.)
but then as an adult when I started college I realized
like I really learned to advocate for myself much better
but at least in the school I went to there really just wasn't(.)
yeah I'm just not so sure it would've helped
yeah (1595-1638)

Level 1 – The Telling

The first level of positioning analysis is used to ask questions about the world of the story: who are these characters and why is it important for the narrator(s) to talk about them (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008)? J.B. relationally positions himself as a former special education student who needed greater confidence to self-advocate for better academic opportunities in secondary school. He recognized his mother's reported advocacy taking the form of "going to bat" for him in elementary school (1612). J.B. attributes his avoidance of talking about being in special education as a method of avoiding bullying, which contributed to a lack of confidence or feeling "broken." He views self-advocacy, in hindsight, as a tool he was he had received explicit instruction and practice with using to meet his wants and needs. J.B. attributes both attitudes of feeling like something was innately wrong with him and skill deficits as contributing to his inability to engage in self-advocacy. This experience fuels his motivation to supply his students—especially his students not marked with "cognitive delay" labels—to engage in self-determined behavior aimed at advocating for expanded learning opportunities (1626).

John positioned the schools he attended—comparing K-12 with his college experience-- as characters in his response to J.B. He also identified past selves as characters that he positions relationally; John as a K-12 student in comparison to John as a college student. John positions the past K-12 student self as someone who he wishes had been a better advocate earlier on. However, he attributed this non-engagement in self-advocacy to both his lack of taught skills and the absence of supportive structures with a greater emphasis on how missing material and social support provided a barrier to anything that “would’ve helped” (1638).

Level 2 – The Told-To/With

Analytic questions associated with Level 2 positioning ask: How is the speaker positioned in the research situation's interactive flow, and how are speaker relations managed (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2011)? The research situation’s context for this narration took place during the final group interview with the core group of 5 participants, who had already attended at least 2 other Zoom sessions together. Repeated group discussions were intended to create a greater sense of connection and trust among the participants and myself as the researcher/facilitator.

During this account, J.B. interacted through a lens of advocacy for the students in his care, including his son, while John interacted with his co-narrators as someone who challenged a narrative of individual responsibility for conquering structural barriers. J.B.’s language and tone were emphatic and purposeful. John’s tone was even as he countered J.B.’s assertion that early learned self-advocacy skills could have made a difference to his educational experience. He based this gentle counter-assertion on his experiences in an under-resourced school and with a family system that knew school as a place of hardship. John responds based on his own experience: “I’m just not so sure it would’ve helped” (1637-1638). John often stopped and restarted thoughts as he emphasized the lack of resources, including staff, needed for him to imagine contexts where well-developed self-advocacy skills would be effective. He laughed as he narrated his thinking “back to the school I went to” but acknowledged the effectiveness of learning self-advocacy skills after transitioning to college “as an adult” (1632; 1635).

Level 3 – The Teller(s)

Following De Fina's focus (2013) on the connection of local identity displays to dominant narrative navigation processes of positioning, I will summarize some of the main findings present in the shared narration of J.B. and John's experiences in special education. Both J.B. and John complicated dominant narratives as they link the answers to their own "Who am I?" questions to questions regarding how they fit into larger social and historical stories about the kind of person who is expected to be a special education student. The dominant narratives of silences/invisibility, catching up/overcoming, and expectations of self-advocacy/independence are positioned in conversation with J.B. and John's stories that accept, counter, or complicate how they fit, or do not fit, within broader social and historical understandings of the type of person who is in special education.

Silences/Invisibility

J.B.'s special education story connected to dominant narratives about stigmatized silences as he shared how self-perception of being "broken" (1595) shaped his identity as a learner, specifically in his confidence and his efficacy in self-advocacy. He cites silence as a protective mechanism to avoid bullying and that this sense of protection came at an affective cost of feeling broken. J.B. complicates the narrative that positions special education as a placement for students with educational disabilities that is *invisiblized* (Nusbaum & Steinborn, 2019). The absence of identity resources in curriculum or pedagogy leaves students identified with disabilities alone to engage in sensemaking processes (Mueller, 2019). The social identity of disability is typically positioned in such a way to creates conditions for greater sense of self-stigma as "identifying as disabled [is] something that is inherently negative" (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 8). J.B.'s stories and talk recognized the harm that came from being left to navigate silence as the dominant narrative linked to being identified as a student with a disability (Bacon & Llavani, 2019). The harm caused by this narrative of silence was acknowledged as detrimental, even as his wish for a replacement narrative reinforces dominant narratives about cure or overcoming vis-à-vis his local talk related to his ability to "catch up" (1597).

Catching Up/Overcoming

The dominant narrative of *overcoming disability* is reflected in J.B.'s story of what he wishes he had known as a student in special education. The message of overcoming is meant to soothe his past-self: "You are gonna catch up and you're gonna be fine" (1597). Qualifying the outcome of being fine with the achievement of *catching up*, J.B.'s narrative links to acceptance and reinforcement of dominant narratives about students with educational disabilities. Dominant narratives position disabled ways of being and doing as *less-than* nondisabled experiences (Hehir, 2002). Special education practices solely aimed at goals of cure or overcoming deficits that mark students as disabled align with status quo assumptions that reflect dominant narratives about the role of catching up. J.B. accepts aspects of this dominant narrative focused on overcoming, while recognizing that experiencing special education labels, positioned as un-nameable identities, limited his ability to self-advocate for educational opportunities available to his peers not identified with disabilities.

The stories and talk J.B. shared throughout the study link to dominant narratives of achieving self-determined goals by escaping special education through overcoming disabilities. This is evident in J.B.'s reporting of what he tells his son who is identified with specific learning disabilities related to reading:

> If you want to become these beautiful things you wanna become in the future/you're gonna have to get beyond this disability/You're gonna have to work and navigate your world to move through this disability/because if you are/if you have an IEP that limits your access/that limits your ability to be in these courses/I didn't take a foreign language in high school because I was in resource language arts/they wouldn't let me (4371-4385).

Again, J.B. locates the ability to transcend limited access to high-interest electives and college preparatory coursework within individual's internally located ability to "get beyond" disability. To be clear, J.B. identifies institutional barriers limiting access to desired classes as unfortunate, but he also links his stories relating to this frustration for himself, his children, and his students to a dominant narrative of individual—not systemic—intervention as difficult, if not impossible to disrupt.

John counters this positioning of special education student identity as something that can be overcome solely through individual effort in later stories that expanded on how he learned about successful self-advocacy through supportive college systems. Part of the support systems John found in college included access to identity representations of historical figures he recognized as learning in ways that were similar to him, ways that today would be considered atypical and perhaps even requiring specialized instruction through special education placement. Because of this exposure, John positioned his identity as a college student with learning disabilities to these narratives that countered dominant understandings of disability. This identity positioning counters narratives of overcoming that he had internalized as a K-12 special education student. This narrative of overcoming was linked to his talk of feeling as if important knowledge had been kept from him. This knowledge had been replaced with messages that hard work, located solely within narrow paths toward academic achievement, was the only way to recognized success. Discovering that these scientists achieved greatness in fields like physics despite unorthodox learning methods was a crucial component of John’s positioning of his identity as a learner. Positioning this shared atypicality with identity narratives that place recognized atypicality within identity categories of disability, he was able to connect to identity resources from history as well as through present-day social understandings of disability as a valued social identity. That positioning addressed an identity resource gap that left no room for connections to positive disability identity. “It's always like/when that's left out/all that's left over is like/”Well, you should just work harder/and if you're failing at this/you have/”Have you considered working harder? (4840-4842)

(Self)Advocacy/Independence

The ability to advocate for one’s wants and needs is considered foundational for self-determined behavior and improved quality of life (Test et al., 2005). J.B. elaborated on the near-impossible balance that needs to be struck by students who attempt to self-advocate for their wants and needs in his individual interview:

> “It’s very political/very emotionally connected/very um hard to navigate/you have to be(.) you have really be a(.)a wordsmith/you have to really be socially aware/in a way that if I wasn’t socially aware/if I struggled with um social emotional cues/if I struggled with umm social

> cues in the sense of “That’s enough. Move on”/Then I would be seen as someone who’s weird/someone who is you know/“Um What are your motives behind this?” (3889-3894).

In the narrative exchange in the group discussion about what he wishes he had known as a special education student, J.B. positioned self-advocacy as a vital skill that he was not able to access. He cited affective domain barriers such as feeling “broken,” along with a lack of instruction of self-advocacy and self-determination skills, such as attending IEP meetings (Lindsey & Varahra, 2022). His local narrative aligned with institutional narratives, which increasingly recognize the value of providing explicit instruction of the building blocks of self-determined behavior (Lindsey & Varahara, 2022). It also links with a dominant narrative that prioritizes independence over providing connections to supportive systems of care, especially for students identified with special education disabilities positioned as *able-enough* within hierarchies of dis/ability (Smith & Mueller, 2022).

John recognized this dominant narrative in J.B.’s story and gently, yet firmly linked his local story to a counter-narrative. The story that John shared in response aligns with a critical disability study in education lens that emphasizes integrating skill-based self-determined behavior expectations within contexts that expect, support, and affirm disability as a social identity (Smith & Mueller, 2022). John’s understanding of the limits of skills-based self-advocacy instruction aimed at independent enactment contrasts with J.B.’s emphasis on institutional definitions of self-advocacy applied to K-12 settings. John empathized with J.B.’s wish for his younger self to have had the skills necessary to effectively self-advocate, but he linked his story to counternarratives that de-emphasize the value of independent overcoming. He situated skill-based self-advocacy within a system that was not designed to expect and support students outside the expected norms of typicality (Leake, 2012; Smith & Mueller, 2021). The counternarrative that was present in John's story aligns to disability studies theorizing about foundational self-determination skills, such as self-advocacy, requiring social capital (Leake, 2012) and supportive institutional structures (Smith & Mueller, 2022).

Keisha & Maureen: I Do Not Have an Advocate

During the first Story Circle session's open discussion phase, the following account took place between Maureen and Keisha.

Maureen:
Well I was actually going to ask Keisha(.)
Keisha right?
I was going to ask you(.)
because immediately when you said that your child might not qualify for an IEP
I want to be asking you questions about
do you have an advocate to be with you during an IEP?
because there are people that volunteer to do it
to make sure your kid gets an IEP
and the people at school can't tell you that
because they will get in trouble
but there's groups and stuff to get on there
I feel kind of advers- I LIKE special ed
but I'm also like
I want to FIGHT people about it
because sometimes it's not the TEACHER
and sometimes I think it is teachers' perceptions of what a special education person looks like
Keisha:
I'm sorry I'm sorry
I don't know why(.)what happened to my internet
But no I do NOT have(.)(Maureen: an advocate?) an advocate.
NO ONE
Tracey:
Well one of the cool things about the story circle structure
is that this becomes a little community of learners right here amongst ourselves
and so

it sounds like Maureen might have some resources that we can connect you with.
Maureen:
There's definitely social media to follow
that you can learn the laws
because she actually is supposed to be observed a certain amount of hours
If she has an IEP goal and she's missed a lot of school
they can't make decisions until they observe enough hours.
Keisha:
OKAY
I'm surely going to look into that
because I'm TOTALLY frustrated about this.
Tracey:
Yeah I feel that
Maureen:
There's usually
I don't know where you live
but usually on different(.)
I hate Facebook
but for that kind of thing
there's Facebook groups where there's special education PTAs and things
and that's where you'll probably find
or a local college
there's lots of ways
there's parents who used to have kids in special ed who are really passionate about making sure your kid gets the best IEP possible
and a lot of times those special education teachers WANT you to fight because it's usually their upper people that are trying to not push for hours
they want those things
but if a parent is like “No my kid needs this”
then that(.)there's so many sayings I could say
what's a good saying for the something to itch?
the scratch the itch or whatever?
you just need to be a pain in their ass pretty much (laughs) to get your kid a good IEP.
Tracey:
Or the… (inaudible).
Keisha:
Right right right
I plan on it
I plan on it
I mean the special education lady(.)she even said she's going to drop her
I mean my baby only been in that school for a few MONTHS
and you're going to drop her already?
because you think that she’s too SMART in class and this and that
but she's not in there because she's supposed to be NOT SMART
she's in there because of her BEHAVIOR (797-841)

Level 3 Positioning Analysis

The stories and talk in Maureen and Keisha's exchange contain counternarratives connected to assumptions about advocacy and parental involvement in special education. Also, the questions Maureen posed to Keisha about her access to advocacy and support link to dominant narratives related to the role of independence and appropriate help-seeking for people with disabilities. These links complicate dominant institutional narratives of self-advocacy by emphasizing the role of community care for ensuring structures of support.

Parental Involvement/Advocacy

Maureen positioned herself as the *kind of person who wants to ask questions* about parents working for adequate special education services for their children. Her local talk is in conversation with narratives recognizing the potential of teachers desiring to provide services operating in tension with institutional norms and restrictions but that having outside help in advocating for "the best IEP possible" (829). When asked if she had someone, Keisha emphasized: "NO ONE" (811). The local talk between Maureen and Keisha linked to dominant narratives about parenting a child in special education, necessitating advocating for getting the help their children require. Maureen positioned herself as effective and comfortable with this work, while recognizing that outside assistance is often necessary to "be a pain in their ass pretty much to get your kid a good IEP" (833). Keisha emphasized her isolation when positioning herself as an advocate with limited social capital that would ease the burden of this overwhelming task of getting the best IEP possible (Rosetti et al., 2021).

These parent narratives of overcoming obstacles through advocacy are institutionally and discursively framed as a constant battle for support, which can make the identity of an unsupported fighter unsustainable for (some) parents. While Maureen positions herself as capable of effective advocacy, the way she maintains consistent advocacy for herself, her children, and her community connections stems from a network of supportive family and strong connections to socially and historically supported (Gee, 2000) social capital (Leake, 2012). She counters narratives of disability identity being solely an individual identity to attempt to provide support through disability community (Smith & Mueller, 2021) and connections to parenting networks (Bacon & Lalvani, 2019; Lalvani & Polvere, 2013).

What a Special Education Person Looks Like

Maureen's local talk positioned the tensions she detects between herself and teachers of students (who would be) identified with disabilities ascribing a narrow, deficit-based narrative that limits access to students with less-apparent aspects of disability. She acknowledged that she is motivated "to fight" (811) on behalf of students and families like her own while recognizing that there are institutional barriers that may run counter to teacher motivations she attributes as helpful. Notably, she highlights how dominant narratives related to "what a special education person looks like" (813) may create barriers for families seeking support for their child. Maureen linked her talk about these barriers to how dominant narratives discursively recognize those who "look like" special education people through having recognizable deficits (Beneke & Cheatham, 2020; Nusbaum & Steinborn, 2019). This is also reflected, and explicitly countered, in Keisha's local talk.

Too Smart

If intelligence, or the discursive recognition of intelligence framed as "smartness", is recognized as a kind of social capital (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011), rather than solely an institutionally authorized conceptualization, it must be also recognized that dominant narratives tell the story of smartness through a particular social-historical lens. This lens situates whose stories are going to align with the dominant narrative-shaped understandings equating the kind of student who is smart enough (to escape special education) with the kind of student who is able-enough. Keisha counters this assertion with her understanding that special education should not be withheld from children deemed “too smart” (839) but rather be accessible to students with disabilities that also impact behavior. She complicates prevailing counternarratives often told by scholars focused on mis- or overidentification of Black children with behavioral disability labels (Bal et al., 2019; Harry & Klinger, 2007; Hart & Lindsey, 2024). Keisha claims these labels and recognizes deficits that need addressing while working to disentangle stigma from treatment, remediation, or even *cure*. When she recounts her daughter’s teacher’s intention to dismiss her from services before kindergarten due to being “too smart,” Keisha counters dominant narratives that treat *smartness* of young black girls in special education "for behavior" as an anomaly (839).

Tiffany: Just Being Able to Like EXPLAIN

The following narrative excerpt is taken from our individual interview. I asked Tiffany if there was more that she could share about having similar experiences and shared genetic diagnoses with her youngest daughter.

Tracey: Is there anything(.)
is there anything more that you can share about having those sorts of experiences with your daughter?
Tiffany:Just being able to like EXPLAIN
'cause my youngest is in(.)
she's the one that has the same condition as me
so like getting her prepared
'cause if my mom would've known you know?(Tiffany shakes head and raises eyebrows)
all the stuff that went along with neurofibromatosis?
or had more information on it?
she could have been able to have the conversations that I can have with my daughter
so letting her know that
explaining what the cafe au lait birthmarks are
like explaining what the ingrown tumors are
and just breaking it down that even though
you know
you may have these marks
there's gonna be people that are
you know think you're scary or think
“Oh if I touch her I'm gonna get those bumps on me”
so getting her prepared and letting her know “Hey it's okay
everybody's born different
God made EVERYBODY’S skin different
So just 'cause you have these(.)
doesn't mean that you're gonna give it to somebody by touching them
or just 'cause you have speech”
andshelovesspeech so seeing her
like her JOY
getting happy that she has speech on Tuesdays or Thursdays or whatever it is
her getting just joy and
understanding that “I just need the extra help to learn how to talk and slow down my words”
Having that and like being able to have that level with her and explain that it's okay
“Mommy was in speech all the way out through
and I still even sometimes I talk too fast and I'll stumble over my words
I'm like “Nobody's perfect
so regardless if you have to have speech or get pulled out for independent reading it's okay
like some people struggle
nobody's perfect so we may not all have those IEP classes in school
but at some point we're all gonna need help on a different level
just some people may need the extra help” (3148-3168)

Level 3 Positioning Analysis

When Tiffany tells stories about her identity as a current parent of children in special education, she positions her identity as providing a specific sort of help to her daughters, as well as the students she serves as a paraeducator. As she talked about her helper identity, she nodded, paused, and breathed deeply as she compared her own experience as someone whose mother was unable to provide the specific identity agent support that she is proud to be able to give her daughters. What is notable is that she did not emphasize a narrative of breaking cycles of performance in her role as an identity agent (Schachter & Ventura, 2008). The stories she shared affirm identity messages of *different, not less* as opposed to a narrative focusing on overcoming disability through resembling students not identified with disabilities. This affirmation of difference counters the identity narratives she had access to as a special education student: narratives of silence, stigma, and escaping systems through achieved identities resembling normal.

(Breaking) Silences

Throughout the study, Tiffany emphasized her identity as a helper. This identity motivated her work life from an early age as she got her first job at 14

> "and ever since then I've been working with kids/but I see my heart and
> just the joy in me is when I helped those/you know that needed more/that
> are incapable of doing stuff on their own/like the blind the wheelchair the
> autistic/ the autism kids" (3063-3066).

She extends this identity to the kind of help she can provide her daughters as identity agents for the social identity experiences of being in special education and having neurofibromatosis. Tiffany positions her identity in relation to dominant narrative assumptions of social identity experiences being modeled by parents and guardians and recognizes that acting as an identity agent provides needed support that she did not have access to as a special education student. Her gestures of gently shaking her head and raising her eyebrows as she talks about the possibility of her mother having had similar knowledge of her disability, along with the shared experiences she has with her daughter, suggest what might have been possible if she had access to the same identity resources as her daughters.

The social identity of disability is most often situated within a single family member leaving children identified as disabled in isolation compared to other social identities (Michalko, 2002). When children are identified with disabilities, especially disabilities that mark them as requiring special education experiences like their parents or guardians, there is often no identity agent present in their family to help interpret dominant narratives of silence related to disability or receiving special education services for disability. Tiffany acknowledges and appreciates the opportunity to counter these stigmatizing silences, and instead provide messages about disability as a typical way of being human, and of being in special education as an expected way of getting educational needs met.

(Disrupting) Stigma

Tiffany describes how she takes on the role of an identity agent for her daughter who shares her genetic condition with gratitude. She implicitly counters dominant narratives of silence that surround disability, opting instead to “prepare” her daughter with information about their shared condition (3158). By doing so, Tiffany acknowledges the importance of early self-knowledge related to disability, a stance influenced by her own experiences. This contrasts with the common narrative of withholding information about disabilities (Nusbaum & Steinborn, 2019) through a narrative of silence that often perpetuates stigma (Goffman, 1963).

Making Disability Visible/Normal

Tiffany talks about telling her daughters about her experiences in special education by describing how she was

> “in speech all the way through and I still/even sometimes I talk too fast and I'll stumble over my words/I'm like “Nobody's perfect so regardless if you have to have speech or get pulled out for independent reading it's okay/like some people struggle/nobody's perfect/So we may not all have those IEP classes in school/but at some point we're all gonna need help on a different level” (3111-3117).

This local talk challenges dominant narratives in two key ways that promote a positive disability identity and may help combat the stigma associated with being in special education. First, Tiffany again affirms the normality of having the same kind of educational disabilities as her daughters in ways not supported by dominant narratives represented in special education. Second, she reinforces this counternarrative by linking the family narrative she shares with her daughters that not only is it “okay” to be pulled to receive specialized instruction, but that she received special education “all the way through” (3112). These counter narratives link to discourses often found in special education relating to overcoming disability/ies via achieved identities of independence connected to escaping the need for services.

Tracey and Maureen: Acknowledging That Part of Your Life

As our individual interview ended, Maureen asked me about my interest in identity and what brought me to this work.

Tracey:
Yeah obviously a lot of my own lived experience fuels
this particular research interest um but also the
initial interest grew because so many people(.)you know
folks on the street
people in my different circles and even my colleagues
my cohort members you know?
they are former teachers and they are in the world of secondary and they would be saying things like
"Yeah my former student keeps emailing me and asking
'Do I have a disability?' so they graduated and
they're trying to get into programs or to receive accommodations to get services that they are entitled to receive."
but many of them
it's not on their radar because nothing was ever EXPLICIT
the "d-word" in terms of disability had(.)
had never been explicitly stated
if ANYTHING there was this idea that special education was something, um, that==
Maureen:
==cured you that you==
Tracey: ==you wouldn't have it anymore yeah==
Maureen: ==I remember feeling that way
but then I remember being like
but that's not really true
like I feel like I could manage life but THEN I think not acknowledging it then makes it also makes it a bigger THING
Like when my grandfather stopped drinking I had to go to this Al-Anon meeting thing

and it was called like the elephant in the room
the blue elephant in the room
when there's something there and you don't acknowledge it
it just gets(.) it's just takes up so much more space in your life(.)
Tracey: yeah
Maureen: Like the days when my ADD is NOT well managed
it(.)I-I-I-have to spend an hour looking for my phone every day 'cause I can't find it
but if it's like MANAGED and I'm organized and MEDICATED
then I know where my shit is(.)
Tracey: yeah
Maureen: and it's like
acknowledging that part of your life is a good thing
and then getting your kids services is a good thing TOO
that's why I think I talked about disability when I(.)
I've been a preschool teacher and kids getting services
I talked to the KIDS
I talked to the parents about how I had an IEP and my son has an IEP and talking about graduating college and how it took(.)
I pretty much got a college degree just because I felt like people didn't think I could do it.
Tracey:
I can relate to that for sure yeah
Maureen:
<laugh> I been kind of mad at myself that I went into a lot of financial debt just to do that
Tracey:
<laugh>yeah(.)yeah spite might not be the best or most healthy motivator
<laugh>

Level 3 Positioning Analysis

Maureen's local talk positions her identity, vis-à-vis dominant narratives perpetuating silences and invisibility related to disability, as someone who can counter and complicate assumed stories about the kind of person identified with educational disabilities. She positions herself as an advocate who challenges the narrative that educational disabilities should either be concealed or essentially cured through special education services offering escape from the assigned identity of special education student and associated stigma. However, Maureen complicates dominant narratives in her local talk that values the services that students identified with disabilities are eligible for while positioning disability as a nameable identity. Naming both disability and receiving special education services as normal, visible, and discussable is seen as something she can provide those around her, including her son with similar educational disabilities, to disrupt oppressive dominant discourses.

Cure/Overcoming

Maureen was curious about how my personal disability identity and researcher identity overlapped and interacted. She asked me specifically at the end of our initial interview about my research focus and purpose. “Is it in disability identity? Is that what you're kind of doing? Like the meat of your stuff? (2720)” My explanation positioned my research identity as the *kind of researcher focused on exploring ideas about disability identity in special education*. Maureen contributed her own linkage to dominant narratives about special education outcomes, as she interjected with her conceptualization of it being something that “cured you” (2772). Her response positioned her relationship to special education as counter to dominant narratives of cure or overcoming, and instead complicated that narrative by replacing those goals for her identified disability (“ADD”) to be “managed” (2781).

Connections to disability identity agent, disability advocate, and disability manager are positioned to counter identities of special education that ain narratives of *overcoming* disabilities through meeting status-quo expectations of ability (Bogart, 2014; Nusbaum & Steinborn, 2019). Maureen’s identity of disability-manager opposes a dominant identity narrative that encourages concealing markers of disability through "individualistic strategies that minimize stigmatized attributes" (Nario-Redmond et al., 2013; p. 468), and embraces a counternarrative in her positioning that refuses concealment to reframe stigmatized traits through a lens of *management* rather than *overcoming*.

Visibilizing Disability

Maureen compared her positioning of disability identity to past experiences with making of family members' alcoholism. Dominant narratives of silence within special education, narratives that ignored the impact of disability on her broader sense of self only served to make it harder to integrate into a life that felt manageable. Maureen positions her identity as the kind of person who received special education services for an educational disability firmly within narratives that counter stigma or shame within dominant narratives of disability. Through the study, Maureen links her stories and talk to positions that normalize disability as a social identity for herself and her family and connects to counternarratives that fight stigma and shame to a broader sense of disability community. This is particularly notable in her detection of how certain disabilities, such as cognitive or intellectual disabilities, are positioned as *less-than*— "there was a very hierarchy of disability" (1727) --to align with norms that value particular ways of being smart. Maureen attributes her ability to access useful identity resources through online community and communication platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook, which help affirm and reinforce disability as a valued social identity (Johnson, 2022).

These dominant narratives have been addressed in extant special education (Smith & Mueller, 2021), rehabilitation psychology (Forber-Pratt, et al, 2021), and disability studies in education (Skritic, 2021) literature. The following table links to the conveyance of dominant narratives, literature related to connections to special education, and narrative excerpts that exemplify how these participants positioned themselves vis-à-vis social and historical narratives related to being a former special education student and current special education parent.

Table 4

Links between Dominant Narratives and Local Talk from Participants

Conveyed Messages	Connection to Special Education	Local Talk Link to Dominant Narratives
Dominant Narrative: **Silences**		
“We don’t talk about disability.”	Discursive Silences/Invisibility Related to Educational Disability (Bacon & Lalvani, 2019; Mueller, 2021; Nusbaum & Steinborn, 2019; Smith & Mueller; 2021)	• “Nobody came in and talked to me” (Keisha, 558). • “I really kind of struggled with peers knowing that, okay, I'm not in your math class (J.B., 1509) • “I like to talk about my disability…” (Maureen, 2112) • “Just being able to like, explain, 'cause my youngest is in, she's the one that has the same condition as me. So like, like getting her prepared. 'cause if my mom would've known, you know, all the stuff that went along with neurofibromatosis or had more information on it, she could have been able to have the conversations that I can have with my daughter” (Tiffany, 3096-3099) • The concept of getting special education was actually something that was talked about more like a

		punishment than something that could actually help you" (John, 5581-5583).
Dominant Narrative: **Cure**		
"Educational disability labels can be escaped or overcome."	Discursive Messages Related to Escaping/Overcoming Special Education and/or Disability through Individual Effort/Advocacy (Clare, 2017; Leake, 2012; Linton, 1998; Smith & Mueller, 2021).	● (about talking to her students) 'Cause I was in those, you know, special classrooms so if they feel like they're getting bullied or, you know, segregated, I can relate to 'em and bring it down that, you know, you are able to step away from this circle. You don't have to be labeled as special need kids." (Tiffany, 3037-3039). ● "If you want to become these beautiful things you wanna become in the future, you're (J.B's son) gonna have to get beyond this disability. You're gonna have to work and navigate your world to move through this disability. Because if you are, if you have an IEP that limits your access, that limits your ability to be in these courses" (J.B., 4370-4372). ● "Yeah (talking about being cured of educational disability) I remember feeling that way, but then I remember being like, that's not really true in a way. Like, I feel like I could manage life. But then I think not acknowledging it then makes it more of a piece of your life and also makes it a bigger thing" (Maureen, 2770-2772). ● "Well, I'm okay because he doesn't get Wilson's reading

		because he's not, he is not really gonna be getting Wilson's reading <laugh>. I'd rather him be in band, be in an ELA that's co-taught and do tutoring outside of the school because the bell doesn't ring for him. Yeah. The end of the day bell does not ring for him" (J.B., 4211-4213). ● "I too wish I'd have been a better advocate for, for myself earlier on. Um, but then, then on the other hand, when I think back to the school I went to, I don't think it would've helped (John, 1630-1631). ● "You're annoying. You're almost too..it's almost like you wear it as a badge of honor. 'Well, why are you wearing as a badge of honor?' I mean, 'Why are you always advocating? Why can't you just trust that people want to help you?' It's the whole, 'Well why didn't you ever say anything?' Why didn't you ask?" (J.B. 3974-3977)
Dominant Narrative: **Hierarchy of Disability**		
"You are not that (kind of) disabled."	Discursive Messages Related to More-Apparent/Less Concealable Disabilities (Clare, 2017; Davis, 2016; Linton, 1998; Olkin, 2022; Michalko, 2002; Skritic, 2021)	● "I mean, all I knew is that I was in a small classroom. Some of 'em were severely handicapped. So I mean, I really felt awkward. I really wasn't supposed to be in the class" (Keisha, 559-560). ● (What he wished he had known as a student) "For me, it would been, 'You're not broken' (J.B, 5033).

	● (What she talks about with her daughter) “Just breaking it down that even though, you know, you may have these marks, there's gonna be people that are, you know, think you're scary or think, ‘Oh, if I touch her, I'm gonna get those bumps on me.’ So getting her prepared and letting her know, ‘Hey, it's okay, you know, everybody's born different. Everybody, you know, God made everybody's skin different’ (Tiffany, 3101-3103). ● To have a learning disability, you have to have a learn--Like, you have to have at least an average IQ. And thinking back, like, that sounds kind of shitty because I was friends with kids who had other disabilities and it was kind of like this weird to me in the eighties, there was a very hierarchy of disability” (Maureen, 1724-1726).

Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings of a positioning analysis that explores the narrated experiences of participants, focusing on how they position their identities vis-a-vis dominant narratives. The study aims to understand how these individuals navigate societal perceptions. The process involves acceptance, rejection, or complication as they position their identities within the context of special education. The dominant narratives often suggest that individuals must overcome disabilities through the concealment of markers of identified differences to escape special education. Other social identity markers such as race, social connections, and disability categories influence their vulnerability within the special education system (Anamamma et al., 2016; Crenshaw, 2016. Skritic, 2021). The stories shared by these adults highlight the stigma associated with educational disabilities and the sensemaking process involved. The chapter emphasizes the importance of providing identity resources necessary for students in special education that provide the possibility of disability to be regarded as a valued social identity. These resources can include representation, acknowledging disability as a social identity, and providing access to supportive relationships with others who share similar special education experiences. The next chapter will explore the implications of lacking these resources and future directions for providing identity resources that promote educational disability as a valued social identity.

Chapter 6: Discussion

"Are you going to get this out to parents? Because I didn't know. They just told me you were lazy and I trusted them because, after all, they were the experts!"
(My mother, May 12, 2024)

Most children with emotional or behavioral disorders are already labeled informally by their peers if not by adult authorities. They get the label du jour among children for those who are misfits. Formal, adult labeling may, in fact, turn away some of the misunderstanding and rejection of their differences. Eventually, many of those with emotional or behavioral disorders are formally and informally labeled unequivocally, sometimes brutally"
(Kaufman, 1999; p.452-453).

The discussion of the results of this qualitative exploration of identity sensemaking processes in special education focuses on how these participants engaged in identity recognition and positioning processes apparent in the stories and talk shared in group Story Circle and individual interviews. The results of this study exemplify the "kinds within kinds" (Gee, 2010; p. 183) of students identified with educational disabilities as what it means to be a student in special education is an ongoing identity conversation that involves continually complying, countering and complicating dominant narratives. This study's findings link dominant narratives of silence, escape/overcoming, and concealment to relevant literature related to navigating these Discourses and relevant narrative data.

Implications based on the findings of this study are discussed in alignment with the purpose of this discursive narrative study: to explore the identity sensemaking experiences of adults who were previously students in special education classes in US pK-12 public schools and now parent children identified with educational disabilities. This study highlights the importance of special education stakeholders listening to students identified with educational disabilities to create effective resources that help them make sense of their identity. These sensemaking resources can be provided by ensuring access to tools for disability identity development (Forber–Pratt, 2017; Mueller, 2019), including identity recognition, identity representation and identity relationships. The discussion also suggests future paths for potential research and practice related to the study findings with a focus on collaborative family partnerships, positioning disability as a potentially valued social identity within teacher education programs and creating connections to potential educational disability agents with students and families.

Grappling with Dominant Narratives in Varied and Complex Ways

> “We have seen that institutions have to rely on discursive practices to construct and sustain I-identities, but people can construct and sustain identities through discourse and dialogue (D-identities) without the overt sanction and support of ‘official’ institutions that come, in some sense, to ‘own’ those identities” (Gee, 2000; p. 103).
>
> “Labeling the education and its recipients special may have been a deliberate attempt to confer legitimacy on the educational practice and to prop up a discarded group. It is also important to consider the feelings such a strategy may mask” (Linton, 1988, p. 10).

Based on the analysis of identity recognition processes evident in this discursive narrative study, these participants primarily grappled with identity sensemaking through the interplay of Institution identity (I-identity) and Discourse (D-identity) dimension (Gee, 2000). As Gee (2000) suggests, these overlaps are expected when using identity as an analytic lens. The research question asking how these participants recognized identity as the kind of person who is in special education was answered via recognition of a complex interplay between assigned I-identity and achieved or ascribed D-identity dimensions. This complication aligns with Bamberg's description (2004) of how social and historical assumptions are most often met within narratives as identity sensemaking processes that can counter hegemonic assumptions in one breath, while in the next breath indicate allegiance with "power-knowledge complexes" that support dominant assumptions of normalcy (p. 204). In short, participants often complicated dominant narratives about the kind of person expected in special education.

The stories and talk shared by these participants linked their experiences as former students and current parents to dominant narratives about being in special education. These dominant narratives act as identity kits containing tools necessary to make sense of recognized identities (Gee, 2012) are:

- silences surrounding disability as a namable identity
- narratives of overcoming or cure and
- messages of dis/ability hierarchy.

Implications

"Being a SPED ('Special Ed') student is one way to be a kind of student: it is one kind of student. There are kinds within kinds" (Gee, 2010; p, 183).

This section connects sensemaking processes shared by participants and the broader implications for special education research and practice concerned with disability identity. The implications of their dialogic engagement (Ligorio, 2010) with what is expected from/as students versus what it means to move through the world as someone who is positioned as unexpected in school settings create possibilities for special education to embrace nuance. This nuance is apparent in Maureen's wholehearted embrace of disability justice vocabulary and community identity seen potentially, and negatively, as *disability chic* (Kaufman & Bader, 2018) in special education literature. She, along with the 4 other participants, also expressed gratitude for the special education services received through specialized instruction in separate classrooms. The implications in her story, and in the stories that work in tension with Maureen's relatively well-supported trajectory through the special education system, rest in the possibilities of providing disability identity resources to help make sense of the special education experience.

Disability identity development can become an important factor when developing effective interventions and/or therapies with special education students (Forber-Pratt, et al., 2017). Identity development is a fundamentally social process (Erikson, 1969; Marcia, 1996, Peneul & Wertch, 2010) and identities such as disability identity are formed through accessing socially derived resources of that recognize disability as a social identity, mirror representations of possible selves that include disability and provide diverse models of what it means to be a person with a disability (Forber-Pratt et al., 2017) . Important adults in the lives of students identified with disabilities (i.e., family members, care providers, teachers, and therapists) must become aware of the importance of providing access to positive identity messages (Forber-Pratt et al., 2017; Mueller, 2019). The power and potential of providing disability identity resources to students in special education should not be ignored (Mueller, 2021).

Acquiring self-knowledge, including identification as a person with a disability, potentially leads to positive outcomes like self-determination (Wehmeyer, 1996) and advocacy for accommodations (Shogren, 2023; Test, 2005). Even with self-knowledge encompassing disability identity, positive outcomes do not happen solely through individual effort (Leake, 2012; Smith & Mueller, 2021). Involving parents, guardians, teachers, and care providers as the closest level of social support is crucial (Schacter & Rich, 2011; Chen, 2009; Harrell-Levy & Kerpelman, 2010) as they serve as identity agents, helping to navigate stigma (Patton Davis, 2019) and provide language useful to access positive identity resources (Gee, 1989).

Positive resources needed for identity development must include tools for recognizing, representing and relationship-building (Forber-Pratt, 2017; Mueller, 2019). These tools for supplying educational disability resources are integrated into discussion of potential implications for special education stakeholders. Implications for using these tools are discussed within the contexts of countering silences about disability through recognition, representing disability as a potentially valued social identity beyond images and language focused on cure, escape, or overcoming traits recognized as disability, and (re)positioning disability within a sociohistorical hierarchy of stigma.

Countering Silences

When talking about identity recognition in contexts of special education research and practice, creating conditions for making special education a nameable experience may create contexts where educational disability may subsequently become a more nameable identity. The power of institutional assignment of educational disability is something that has been viewed through a critical lens from within and outside of special education orthodoxy (Annamma et al., 2016; Baker, 2002; Harry & Klinger, 2007; Kaufman & Hallahan, 1974). When schools attempt to soften stigma surrounding identified impairments marked as disability, stigma is reinforced as dominant narratives about disability are communicated by avoiding terminology that represents disability as an expected way of being a student with “ties to positive social identities, powerful histories, rights, and entitlements” (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2020; p. 7) . The implications of shifting away from stigmatizing silences about disability would potentially help students and families through increased comfort with disability talk, including the foundational act of saying the word disability (Andrews, et al., 2019) may create conditions for reduced self-stigma (Bogart, 2019), increased self- (Leake, 2012) and community-advocacy (Smith & Mueller, 2021).

“Say The Word”

Working to disrupt dominant narratives in special education includes creating practices that expand ideas of acceptability beyond “normal” and “abnormal” but erasing the term disability when it has been assigned to students through institutional evaluation ameliorates potential stigma-fighting identity resources (Lalvani & Baglieri, 2019). Four of the five participants self-identified as a person with a disability or disabled person during the demographic interviews. Maureen was the only participant who extensively used the word disability during her stories and talk. This avoidance of saying-the-word links to dominant narratives of silence and is potentially related to a lack of language available to students and families (Bacon & Lalvani, 2019). Teacher-educator discourse (Bacon & Lalvani, 2019) is filled with euphemistic framings of students with disabilities including “exceptional, special, differently-abled, and inclusion kids.” (Bacon & Lalvani, 2019; p. 396). When disability is addressed, it is often cloaked in vocabulary that broadly emphasizes diversity or difference, with the word disability remaining unnamed or made invisible (Nusbaum & Steinborn, 2019). In classroom settings, discussions aimed at addressing disability often follow a script that briefly mentions difference with a focus on steering conversations to the main idea of sameness being what is most important (Beneke & Cheatham, 2020; Mingus, 2011). These discursive messages silence discussion about disability being acceptable while creating barriers for identity resources that normalize ways of being that may be truly different from expected norms (Mingus, 2011). Teachers often use rhetoric of “we are all different” both as a starting place as well as a finish line (Bacon & Lalvani, 2019) with disability remaining unnamed, sending identity messages to students identified with an educational disability that their experience is unnamable.

Family Partnerships

J.B., John, Keisha, Maureen, and Tiffany told stories about their parents influencing how they felt about being in special education and how they aimed to support the ways their children felt about special education to make sure they had a better experience than they did. Recognizing disability as a potentially valued social identity has implications for practice for special education stakeholders working closely within family partnerships due to parents and guardians acting as identity agents (Schacter & Ventura, 2008) who help co-construct the building blocks of identification (Erikson, 1968; Sokol, 2009) or primary Discourses (Gee, 2012). Special educators, who have long-inhabited roles as facilitator of collaborative family partnerships, can disrupt stigma by intentionally modeling the kind of person who says the word disability when engaging with adult caregivers. Avoiding euphemisms like “special needs” and “exceptionalities” in favor of saying disability provides examples of language in use (Gee, 2012) which communicates institutional recognition of disability as a nameable way of being a student (Linton, 1998).

This study also challenges assumptions that families of students identified with educational disabilities lack experiences with special education as students. Special education assumptions of what a typical special education parent has experienced may benefit from disruption that involves displacing the tools offered via institutional Discourse identity kits, potentially influencing deficit thinking (Patton Davis, 2019) regarding adults who were in special education (Welch, 2002; Osgood, 2010.) Remaining reflective and open to recognizing disability identity alongside adults who have similar special education experiences as their children can provide valuable insights for knowledgeable special educators collaborating with families who bring a variety of experiences to the IEP meeting table. Recognizing that these parents and guardians may be continually grappling with what it means to be a special education student may inform the way that research and practice is conducted with families through collaborative partnerships.

Representation Beyond Overcoming

This study has implications for how the recognition of being the kind of person who requires specialized instruction for educational disability is positioned. When silences around disability are broken in classrooms, it is often through dominant narratives recognizing disability as tragic, static, and in need of cure or “overcoming” (Bacon & Lalvani, 2019; Nusbaum & Steinborn, 2019). Disability representations in K-12 pedagogy and curriculum are commonly scary, foolish, pitiable, or other-than-normal (Bacon & Lalvani, 2019; Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017; Cologon, 2013). When disability is represented in special education teacher education contexts, people with disabilities are often represented as “solely recipients of intervention, who passively participate in school environments designed to help them ‘overcome’ their stigmatized disability labels” (Mueller, 2021; p.1).

Identity Relationships

The stories shared in this study talked about making sense of what it meant to be in special education largely with no access to identity resources beyond silence and stigmatized hierarchies of dis/ability and the ability of escaping special education labels within placements within that hierarchy. Maureen spoke of receiving impromptu, yet explicit, instruction about her place within this hierarchy while others received messages about the relevance of disability to their assignment as a student with an educational disability label. While each participant enthusiastically countered dominant narratives of educational disability being silent/invisible with their child(ren), creating connections to others with similar experiences of disability was also linked to the kind of support they wished for and desired for their child. These stories connect to dominant narratives that position educational disability as silent/silenced, with this silencing being interrupted with messages of overcoming through intervention and individual effort and in relation to how disabilities are institutionally/discursively situated (Skritic et al., 2021).

Though each participant had different ways of positioning disabilities in proximity to how they positioned disability as an identity for themselves and their child(ren), everyone expressed the importance of their ability to intentionally model what it means to be in special education as a parent. The implications of the perceived positive impact of sharing similar experiences with their children can be addressed by enlisting identity agents in guiding positive identity development within special educational settings (Schacter & Ventura, 2008). Schachter and Ventura (2008) highlight the partnership aspect of identity agents which allows for the modeling and facilitation of behaviors aligned with different discursive identity traits (Gee, 2000). Schacter and Ventura's (2008) emphasis on adults who freely and intentionally support identity formation specific to shared social identities aligns with Gee's framing of modern identity dimensions (2000) that are freely chosen and achieved rather than ascribed. This shared emphasis on agency and partnerships is crucial for promoting disability identity as a way of being a kind of person who is (should be) expected in school and community contexts (Forber-Pratt, et al., 2021). Connections to disability identity–the components including individual identification and identification to disability as a group–help create conditions of increased quality of life (Olkin, 2022) including the possibility of replacing stigma and shame with disability pride (2022; Smith & Mueller). Creating conditions where disability pride is accessible means recognizing and disrupting the hierarchies of dis/ability (Botha, et al., 2022; Smith & Mueller, 2021) that were linked to in various ways within J.B.'s, John's, Keisha's, Maureen's and Tiffany's narratives.

Countering Hierarchies through Community Connection

To recognize and counter narratives of stigmatized hierarchies of dis/ability, it's important to foster connections to community while offering alternatives to deficit messages associated with the kind of student who is smart and the kind of student who belongs.

Smart-ness in Special Education

These dominant narratives were linked within the stories and talk shared by these participants in terms of what it means to be in special education framed by how close-to-normal special education students were recognized as being. Some narrated experiences explicitly affirmed a smart status (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011). Others, such as

Keisha's stories of frustration, linked to an entanglement of institutional and discursive discourses which diminished the need for advocated-for specialized instruction, due to the student's traits being recognized as too smart for special education. Students with disabilities that marked them as severe were recognized as being object lessons vis-à-vis who they did not (want to) resemble. The implications for these shared narratives suggest the need for deeper exploration of disability hierarchies that pit close-to-normal students discursively against those who have disabilities that are more-apparent.

The implications for special education involve a tall order; to provide bridges to self-knowledge related to identified disability without devaluing others who may represent stigmatized traits associated with intellectual deficits. The challenge and importance of this is seen in Clare's call to disability activists (2017), many of whom are righteously defensive after lived experiences with disability mark them as targets for being incorrectly identified with intellectual disabilities due to body/mind differences from institutional expectations and/or communication impairments.

> Let me remind all of us— disabled and nondisabled —that every time we defend our intelligence, we come close to disowning intellectually disabled people. We imply that it might be okay to exclude, devalue, and institutionalize people who actually live with body-mind conditions that impact the ways they think, understand, and process information. (Clare, 2017; 158).

Potential for Pride, Solidarity, and Belonging

Early and transparent discussion of what it means to be in special education is linked in Maureen's narrated experiences in what she describes as disability pride.

Disability identity and pride within educational contexts exist as an intertwined and vital component of resisting dominant narratives of disability in schools (Mueller, 2021). Creating conditions for disability pride must involve disability recognition (e.g. saying the word *disability*), while positioning disability with social identities worth valuing enough to feel pride in the connection to disability as a group identity (Smith et al., 2009). These connections can be formed by facilitating relationships with other students with disabilities in ways that create a sense of solidarity as opposed to a hierarchy of stigma (Haft, 2023; Skritic, 2021) and by encouraging supportive relationships with adults who have had similar special education experiences who are willing to intentionally model what it means to navigate similar barriers and integrate similar traits (Schacter & Rich, 2011).

Limitations

This study offers an important starting point for exploring how identity sensemaking processes use recognition and positioning by individuals with special education experiences though it includes some limitations. These limitations are primarily related to participant selection and characteristics, and the restrictions inherent in conducting online interviews to focus on small story data collection.

The scope of this discursive narrative study focusing on identity was limited by the logistical needs inherent in seeking a very specific population. Online recruitment and data collection methods may have drawn a narrower swath of even this already narrow demographic to this study.

Though positioning analysis of small story narratives is typically conducted in ethnographic research contexts that include direct observation (Bamberg &

Georgakopoulou, 2013) interview data is considered an appropriate method for conducting Level 3 positioning analysis (De Fina, 2017). In retrospect, I see how the framing of the Story Circle group interviews set my participants up to engage in more deliberate narrativization—conscious structuring of the beginning, middle, and endpoints of narratives that may not naturally unfold in stories and talk that occur in more naturalistic data collection settings (Bamburg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). I am grateful to find that some of the richer data connecting identities-in-interaction to dominant narratives were collected from the open conversation components. In future research projects involving identity sensemaking in special education, there should be even more opportunities for open-ended, naturalistic engagement.

By applying De Fina's analytic framework (2017) to this study, in addition to there being no single special education story across participants when using Level 3 positioning analysis, expectations should include ongoing, continual shifts in how individual participants answer the question: How do I (mis)fit within dominant narratives related to being in special education? A key aspect of analyzing identity positioning is the iterative process of identifying patterns shared by participants as contexts of the story, audience, and relationship between storyteller and linkage to dominant narratives shift (De Fina, 2017). Though I was able to engage in iterative analysis based on multiple group interviews and single individual interviews, researchers doing similar interview-based positioning analyses in the future would benefit from research designs that allow increased iterativity (Georgakoupoulu, 2013) to identify and analyze these shifts and patterns.

Future Directions

More research is needed that puts perspectives of students identified with educational disabilities at the center of the inquiry. Conducting research such as participatory action research (Baum et al., 2006) and insider research by individuals with experiences in special education (Hernández-Saca, 2019; Mueller, 2019) may help ensure that disabled students are able to act as agents of the research agenda. Increasingly, individuals with disabilities are claiming, “Nothing about us, without us!” (Charlton, 1998) with disability justice scholars and self-advocates gaining momentum for including research within this movement (Hoekstra, et al., 2018; Koontz, et al., 2022).

In combination with research conducted by and with current and/or former special education students that centers the lived experiences of diverse students identified with educational disabilities, future directions in disability identity research should encompass critical quantitative (QuantCrit) tenets (Gillborn et al., 2018) when measuring the impact of making disability a nameable social identity within educational contexts. are specific to critical race theory but can be expanded to intersections with disability through a DisCrit lens while amplifying the DisCrit recognition that race and disability cannot be conflated and are not interchangeable (Ferri and Connor 2006): 1) that racist norms infiltrate even studies deemed neutral 2) numbers are not neutral 3) categories are not natural 4) voice and insight (e.g. data never ‘speaks for itself’), and 5) studies situated within social justice/equity orientations (Castillo & Gillborn, 2023; Garcia, et al., 2018; Gillborn et al., 2018)

Processes related to teacher education research and practice should prioritize the provision of identity resources offered through tools that allow students to recognize disability outside of deficit framings of representation. Preservice and inservice teachers, especially teachers focused on teaching students identified with educational disabilities, should be educated on the importance of situating disability as an identity that is recognizable within a rich disability history (Mueller & Beneke, 2022). Given that most teachers of disabled students do not claim a disability identity (Beneke & Cheatham, 2022), the importance of providing the language and connections that allow community building necessary for navigating hassles related to disability while fighting stigmatized messages must be an ongoing focus for teacher education research and practice (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021; Longmore & Umansky, 2001; Mueller & Beneke, 2022; Nielsen, 2012; Putnam, 2005).

Conclusion

As a former special education student turned special education teacher, my broad teaching goal was always to be the kind of teacher I needed when I was younger. With this research, my focus shifted to co-creating research that would help students like me, my former students, and their families grappling with how to make sense of being in special education. The focus of this study aimed to explore the perspectives of parents who share special education experiences with their children in the hopes of taking a first step toward further research and practice that prioritizes managing disability-based stigma in ways other than combining institutional and discursive dimensions that encourage concealment or cure. This is a priority that will require commitment to nuance, contextualization, and above all, valuing the perspectives of those with the lived experiences of educational disability. My background in early childhood special education primed me to approach research problems and questions with a propensity for if/then framings. With this framing in mind, I challenge the field of special education with a call to focus on providing identity sensemaking resources to our students: If we are charged with the powerful task of assigning educational disabilities to students, then we must take seriously the work of researching and implementing best practices related to navigating disability sensemaking with our students and families.

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Appendix A: Exempt Amendment Form Approval

IRB Project Number	2097723
IRB Review Number	398636
Funding Source	Department of Special Education
Initial Application Approval Date	September 06, 2023
Approval Date of this Review	September 22, 2023
IRB Expiration Date	September 06, 2024
Level of Review	Exempt
Project Status	Active - Exempt
Risk Level	Minimal Risk
HIPAA Category	No HIPAA
Approved Documents	Informed Consent & Assent - Consent (Exempt Studies Only): #663564 Other Study Documents - Focus Group Protocol: #663561 Other Study Documents - Interview Questions: #663560 Recruitment Materials - Recruitment Flyer: #663562 Recruitment Materials - Recruitment Letter: #663563

The principal investigator (PI) is responsible for all aspects and conduct of this study. The PI must comply with the following conditions of the approval:
1. No subjects may be involved in any study procedure prior to the IRB approval date or after the expiration date.
2. All study changes must be IRB approved prior to implementation utilizing the Exempt Amendment Form
3. Major noncompliance must be reported to the MU IRB on the Event Report within 5 business days of the research team becoming aware of the deviation. Major noncompliance are deviations that caused harm or have the potential to cause harm to research subjects or others, and have or may have affected subject's rights, safety, and/or welfare. Please refer to the MU IRB Noncompliance policy for additional details.
4. The Annual Exempt Form must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval at least 30 days prior to the project expiration date to keep the study active or to close it. Maintain all research records for a period of seven years from the project completion date.
5. If you are offering subject payments and would like more information about research participant payments, please view the MU Business Policy and Procedure Manual . Please view the MU HRPP/IRB policies describing IRB exempt and other requirements.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the MU IRB Office at 573-882-3181 or email to muresearchirb@missouri.edu. Thank you, MU Institutional Review Board

Appendix B: Recruitment Letter

Hello!

My name is Tracey Kenyon Milarsky, and I am a researcher at the University of Missouri–Columbia. I'd like to invite you to be a part of our special education story study. We want to learn more about the experiences and stories of adults in the US who were once in special education classes and now have kids in US public schools who are also in special education classes. Your stories can make a difference in helping us understand how students make sense of their identity in special education and what makes each parent, student, and family's experience unique.

To be a part of our study, you need:

- To be an adult between 21 and 50 years old.
- To have spent at least one year in special education classes in a US public school
- To now have a child (or children) between 3 and 21 years old who also has experiences in special education classes in US public schools

The study will involve:

- **Participating in 3 out of 4 1-hour group interview Zoom sessions, where you share your experiences in a group.**
    - The first session will be required for every participant. We will establish expectations, determine the names we want to be known by in this study, and get to know one another as a community of storytellers.
    - The remaining sessions will be Story Circles; where we take turns sharing stories about our experiences in special education as a former student and as a current parent of young children who are in special education.
- **Participating in one 45-minute individual interview using Zoom, where you can talk one-on-one with us about the stories you have shared.**
- **Responding to emails asking brief questions about your special education experiences or seeking more information about the stories you share.**

For ease and convenience, everything will be done online using Zoom and brief emails. We are offering $100 Amazon gift cards to acknowledge participants' time and energy. Your personal information will be kept private and secure, and only the research team will see it.

If you want to join our study or have any questions, please email me at tkmt3b@umsystem.edu or text me at 573-814-9525. You may also choose to contact my advisor, Dr. Chad Rose at rosech@umsystem.edu. A brief list of questions will be sent to you through email to determine if you are eligible for this study. You will not be compensated for answering these eligibility questions. Thank you for thinking about joining our study. Your stories matter, and we can't wait to hear them!

Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer

SPECIAL EDUCATION STORIES WANTED!

Join our special education narrative study at the University of Missouri - Columbia

Who is eligible?

- **Adults** between **21 and 50 years** old who were
- Students in **special education** classes in US public schools who
- Have a **child** between **3 to 21 years** of age with special education classroom experiences

Participation involves:

- Participating in an initial **Zoom** meet-and-greet **group interview session** (Story Circle) to build community and establish expections.
- Attending at least **2 out of the 3** remaining **Zoom group interview** Story Circle sessions.
- Meeting with the lead researcher for a **single individual interview** on **Zoom** to discuss and elaborate on the stories shared in the Story Circle sessions.
- Responding to brief **emails**, to provide answers to questions or clarifications as needed.

Participants receive:

- A $100 Amazon gift card for their time and energy
- The chance to help schools be better and more inclusive by sharing their stories

Interested? Have Questions?

Email **Tracey Kenyon Milarsky** at **storystudy@missouri.edu**

IRB #2097723 MU

Initial Application Approval Date September 06, 2023 - IRB Expiration Date September 06, 2024

University of Missouri

Appendix D: Social Media Recruitment Materials

SPECIAL EDUCATION STORIES WANTED

We want to hear the stories of **adults** who were once in special education classes as **students** who are now **parenting** children in special education.

Who is eligible?

- **Adults between 21 and 50** years old who
- **Were special education students** who
- Have **a child between 3 to 21** years of age **in special education.**

What is involved?

- Sharing stories about your experiences
- Attending at least 3 out of 4 group Zoom Story Circle sessions
- Meeting with the lead researcher for 1 Zoom interview
- Responding to brief emails for questions or clarifications as needed

Participants receive:

- A $100 Amazon gift card for their time and energy
- The chance to help schools be better and more inclusive by sharing your stories

INTERESTED? HAVE QUESTIONS?

Email **Tracey Kenyon Milarsky** at **storystudy@missouri.edu** to learn more about this study: Past and Present Experiences in Special Education (IRB Reference Number:2097723 MU)

University of Missouri

Text accompanying the above visual:

Calling all adults who were once in special education classes in the US and now have children in special education classes! Share your unique experiences and stories in our special education story study. Help us understand how students make sense of their identity in special education. Participate in group interview sessions and a one-on-one interview, all conveniently done online through Zoom. Receive a $100 Amazon gift card as a thank you for your time and energy. Your personal information will be kept private and secure, and only the research team will see it.

If you want to join our study or have any questions, please email storystudy@umsystem.edu. A brief list of questions will be sent to you through email to determine if you are eligible for this study. You will not be compensated for answering these eligibility questions. Thank you for thinking about joining our study. Your stories matter, and we can't wait to hear them!

Appendix E: Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Project Title: Past and Present Experiences in Special Education: Exploring Parents' Narrative Identity Sensemaking with Positioning Analysis

Principal Investigator/Researcher: *Tracey Kenyon Milarsky/Chad A. Rose, Ph.D.*

IRB Reference Number: 2097723

You are invited to take part in a research project. You must be between 21 and 50 years of age with a child between 3 to 21 years of age. Your participation is voluntary, and you may stop being in this study at any time. The purpose of this research project is to explore identity sensemaking processes in special education. You are being asked to share stories about your experiences as a student in special education as well as stories about experiences as a parent of a child who in special education. You are being asked to share these stories in group and individual interviews over Zoom. Each participant will be asked to participate in a minimum of 4 online sessions: 1 introductory group session; at least 2 of 3 scheduled Story Circle sessions, and 1 one-on-one session. Your participation should last between 4 and 5 hours for online meetings, interviews, and possible email questions/clarifications. For your time and effort, we will be offering compensation in the amount of a $100.00 Amazon gift card. The information you provide will be video- and audio-recorded; only the research team will have access to these recordings.

If you have questions about this study, you can contact the University of Missouri researchers; Tracey Kenyon Milarsky at tkmt3b@umsystem.edu (573-814-9525) or Dr. Chad Rose at rosech@umsystem.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 573-882-3181 or muresearchirb@missouri.edu. The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to make sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected. If you want to talk privately about any concerns or issues related to your participation, you may contact the Research Participant Advocacy at 888-280-5002 (a free call) or email muresearchrpa@missouri.edu.

You can ask the researcher to provide you with a copy of this consent for your records, or you can save a copy of this consent if it has already been provided to you. We appreciate your participation in this study.

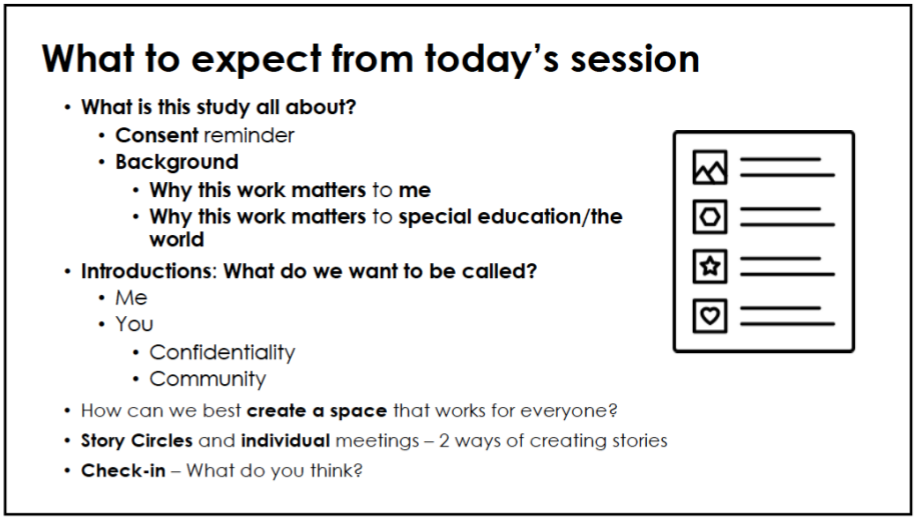
Appendix F: Story Circle Introduction Session Presentation

Past and Present Experiences of Special Education

IRB Reference Number: 2097723

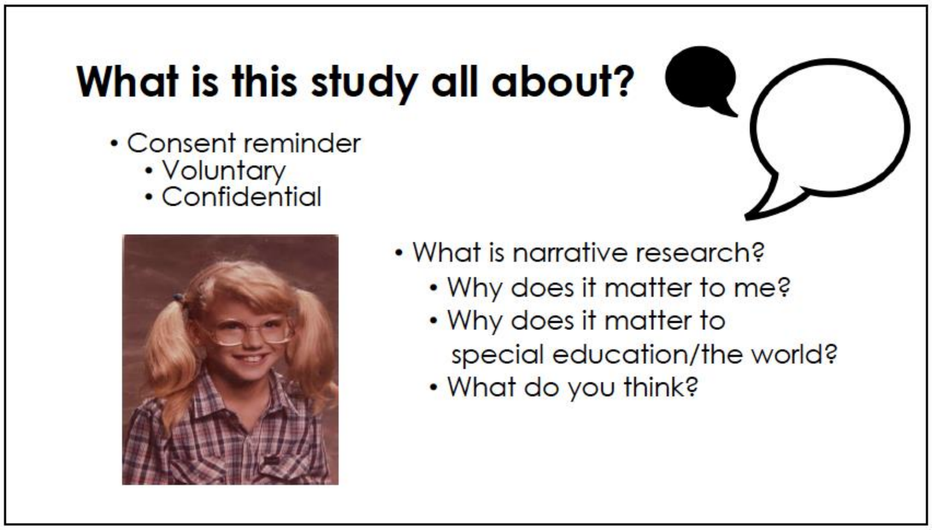
INTRODUCTORY SESSION

Tracey Kenyon Milarsky



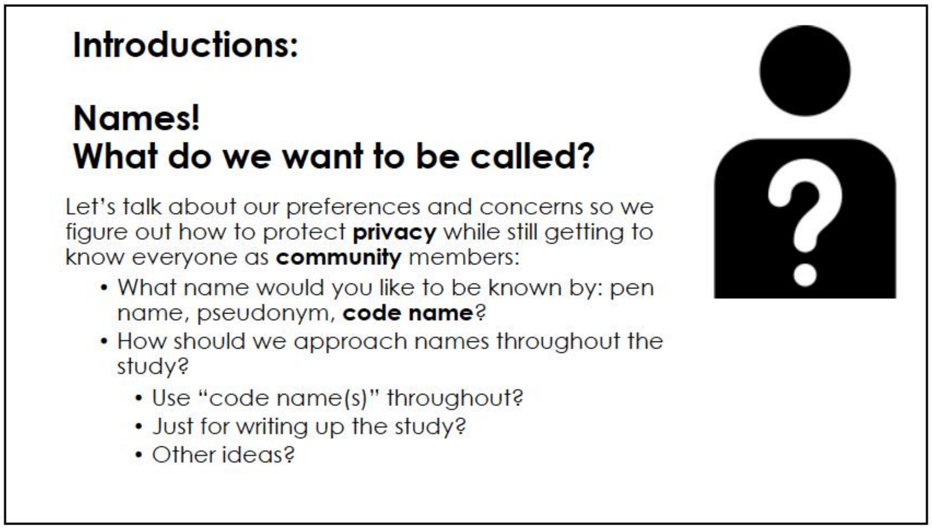
What to expect from today's session

- **What is this study all about?**
  - **Consent** reminder
  - **Background**
    - **Why this work matters** to **me**
    - **Why this work matters** to **special education/the world**
- **Introductions**: **What do we want to be called?**
  - Me
  - You
    - Confidentiality
    - Community
- How can we best **create a space** that works for everyone?
- **Story Circles** and **individual** meetings – 2 ways of creating stories
- **Check-in** – What do you think?



What is this study all about?

- Consent reminder
  - Voluntary
  - Confidential
- What is narrative research?
  - Why does it matter to me?
  - Why does it matter to special education/the world?
  - What do you think?

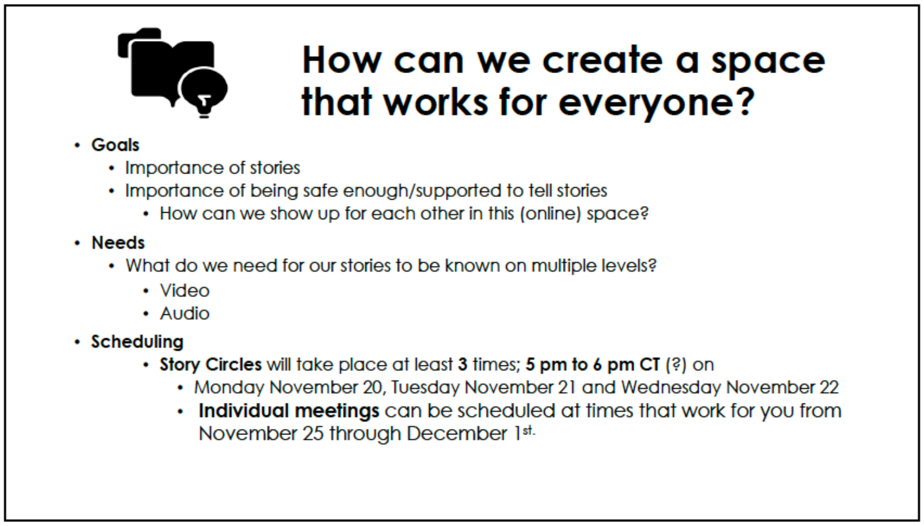


Introductions:

Names!
What do we want to be called?

Let's talk about our preferences and concerns so we figure out how to protect **privacy** while still getting to know everyone as **community** members:

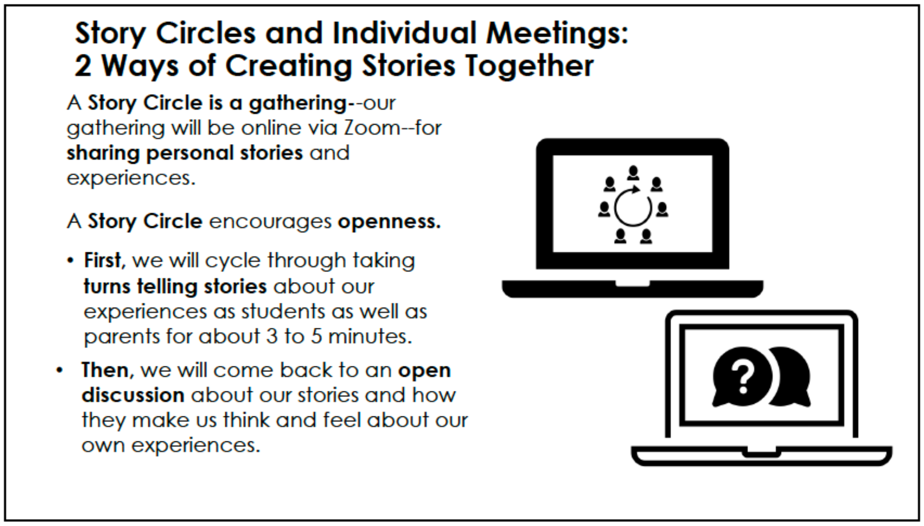
- What name would you like to be known by: pen name, pseudonym, **code name**?
- How should we approach names throughout the study?
  - Use "code name(s)" throughout?
  - Just for writing up the study?
  - Other ideas?



How can we create a space that works for everyone?

- **Goals**
  - Importance of stories
  - Importance of being safe enough/supported to tell stories
    - How can we show up for each other in this (online) space?
- **Needs**
  - What do we need for our stories to be known on multiple levels?
    - Video
    - Audio
- **Scheduling**
    - **Story Circles** will take place at least **3** times; **5 pm to 6 pm CT** (?) on
      - Monday November 20, Tuesday November 21 and Wednesday November 22
      - **Individual meetings** can be scheduled at times that work for you from November 25 through December 1st.

5



Story Circles and Individual Meetings: 2 Ways of Creating Stories Together

A **Story Circle is a gathering**--our gathering will be online via Zoom--for **sharing personal stories** and experiences.

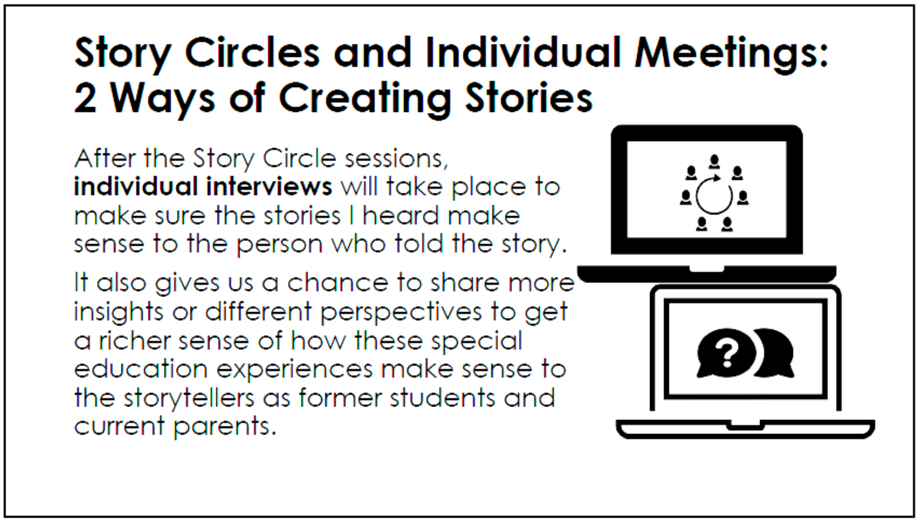
A **Story Circle** encourages **openness.**

- **First**, we will cycle through taking **turns telling stories** about our experiences as students as well as parents for about 3 to 5 minutes.
- **Then**, we will come back to an **open discussion** about our stories and how they make us think and feel about our own experiences.

6

Story Circle Structure:

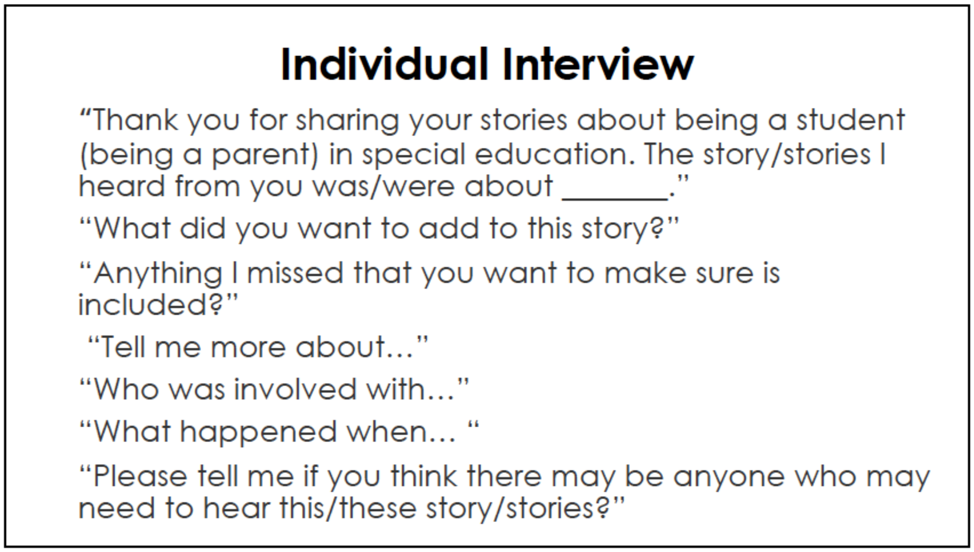
- **Introduction**
- **Reminders** of Consents and Covenants
- Group **(Re)Introductions**/Rapport Building
- **Round 1: Childhood** Experiences in Special Education
- **Group Discussion** (Round 1)
- **Break**
- **Round 2: Parenting** Experiences in Special Education
- **Group Discussion** (Round 2)
- Debrief and **Feedback**
- **Closing** and Gratitude



Story Circles and Individual Meetings: 2 Ways of Creating Stories

After the Story Circle sessions, **individual interviews** will take place to make sure the stories I heard make sense to the person who told the story.

It also gives us a chance to share more insights or different perspectives to get a richer sense of how these special education experiences make sense to the storytellers as former students and current parents.



Individual Interview

"Thank you for sharing your stories about being a student (being a parent) in special education. The story/stories I heard from you was/were about _______."

"What did you want to add to this story?"

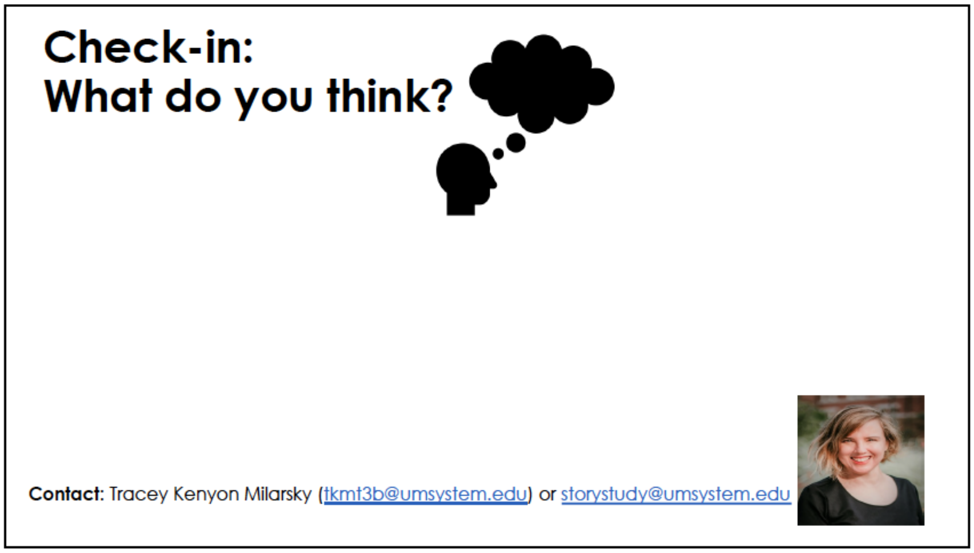
"Anything I missed that you want to make sure is included?"

"Tell me more about…"

"Who was involved with…"

"What happened when… "

"Please tell me if you think there may be anyone who may need to hear this/these story/stories?"



Check-in:
What do you think?

Contact: Tracey Kenyon Milarsky (tkmt3b@umsystem.edu) or storystudy@umsystem.edu

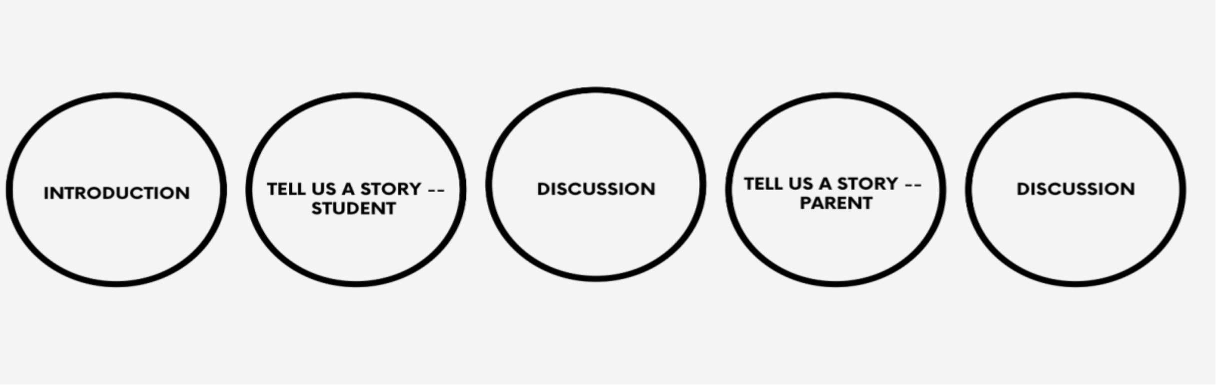
Appendix G: Introduction Script for Story Circle Sessions

Welcome to this Story Circle session. Today, we will be discussing and sharing our experiences in special education. Before we start, let's go over what we will be doing during this session.

First, it's important to know that this session is part of a research project. Your participation is voluntary, and anything you share will be kept confidential. Your insights will contribute to our understanding of special education experiences.

There are a few ground rules to ensure a respectful and supportive environment. Please remember to mute your microphone when others are speaking to reduce background noise. If you want to share or ask a question, use the "Raise Hand" feature in Zoom. We want everyone's stories to be heard and valued.

Let's begin with introductions. Please briefly introduce yourself, including your preferred name and any relevant information about your connection to special education. I'll start: My name is Tracey. I was in special education classes from 1st grade until I graduated high school. I worked as a teacher, including a special ed teacher, before coming back to school to study the experiences of people who have grown up in special education classrooms. I was in special ed because of math, organization, and emotional regulation. My kids, who are now teenagers and young adults, didn't qualify for special education services, but they have similar diagnoses. I believe it's important to focus on the experiences of the students when researching special education.



For the first round, we will focus on childhood experiences in special education. Please share a story about your special education experience as a child. Each participant will have up to 5 minutes to share their story. You can react non-verbally using Zoom reactions or just nod along.

After everyone has shared their childhood stories, we will have a brief group discussion to explore common themes or reflections.

We will then take a short break to stretch and refresh before moving on to the second round. In this round, we will discuss parenting experiences in special education. Please share a story about your experience as a parent of a child in special education. Each participant will have up to 5 minutes to share their story, and non-verbal reactions are encouraged.

Following the sharing of parenting stories, we will have another brief group discussion to reflect on common themes or insights.

In the last part of the session, we will have a debrief and feedback session. We would love to hear any final thoughts or feedback you have about the story circle experience.

Finally, I want to express gratitude for your participation and remind you of the importance of your contributions to the research project. We have asked for your contact information to schedule member-checking or semi-structured individual interviews in the coming week. If you have any further questions or concerns, please feel free to reach out.

Please note that the timing for each section is approximate and may vary. I will adapt the schedule to ensure everyone has a chance to share their experiences. Also, it’s important to take breaks as needed to use the restroom, grab a drink of water, and check on how things are going with family. I have also tested the technology and Zoom platform to minimize any technical issues.

Thanks so much for joining us today, and I am looking forward to telling stories with you all.

Appendix H: Glossary of Transcription Symbols Used

Adapted from Jefferson, 2004.

(.)	pause
STILL	speech that is emphasized; louder than surrounding talk
?	rising intonation; with or without associated question-asking
=	indicates latching or no gap between speakers' talk
<nods>	clarifying information provided by transcriber/interviewer/analyst

VITA

Tracey Kenyon Milarsky was raised in Central Florida where she attended Seminole and Orange County Schools before miraculously graduating from high school in the early 90s. Working steadily in early childhood settings, she chipped away at her bachelors degree over the course of decades before finishing her bachelor's degree in psychology at Columbia College (Missouri). Finally in the groove--thanks to the late recognition and treatment of ADHD--she continued her education to become certified in special education through Columbia College's MAT program. After 5 years as a special educator teaching young children with goals related to behavior, she transitioned to a full-time doctoral program through the Office of Special Education Programs in the U.S. Department of Education's leadership grant in May 2020. When she is not thinking about how to make schools safe and productive places for all students and families, Tracey likes to hang out with family and friends, read short stories and poetry, and work on her deadlift.