FINDING A VOICE: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

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FINDING A VOICE: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the history of special education in the United States, there have been systemic power imbalances that tilt toward the adults in charge – silencing students' voices and stealing their opportunities in the educational process. This narrative inquiry study sought to explore the lived experiences of students with learning disabilities, focusing on their use of voice within special education settings. Specifically, the study examined their involvement in developing their Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and the barriers that restrict self-advocacy. When students turn 18, they become their own legal educational advocate. For some, this can occur while they are still in high school, highlighting the need for a strong student voice within the IEP process. Students with disabilities can navigate using their voices to advocate for their educational needs with proper tools and supports in place.

Participants, all over the age of 18, were recruited through criterion and snowball sampling via social media and electronic communication across several Midwestern states. They shared their experiences through a mixed-method approach involving surveys, in-depth interviews, and journal reflection prompts. The central research question guiding this study was: What are the stories (secret, sacred, and cover) that students in special education narrate about using their voices in their educational experiences? Findings are framed through the

metaphor of "Mount Spededemic," introduced in the study's theoretical framework, to illustrate what conditions must exist for students with disabilities to ascend toward meaningful self-advocacy. The implications extend beyond special education, offering insight into how educational systems can better support all students in developing their advocacy skills.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the School of Education, Social Work, and Psychological Sciences, have examined a dissertation titled “Finding a Voice: A Narrative Inquiry into Student Experiences in Special Education,” presented by Riley Katherin Galloway, candidate for the Doctor of Education degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

Supervisory Committee

Loyce Caruthers, Ph. D., Committee Chair
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PREFACE

The concept of a growth mindset versus a fixed mindset was foreign to me until my first back-to-school faculty meeting as a student teacher. The high school I was placed in for my practicum experience was conducting an all-staff book study that fall, and the book selected was Mindset: The New Psychology of Success by Carol Dweck (2007). The school staff was grounded in the common definition of mindset as the self-conceptions used to structure the self and guide behavior (Dweck, 2007). Participating in that book study allowed me to clearly see the path that had led me to sit in that room nearly a decade ago. Throughout my undergraduate career, doors were slammed shut, forcing me to find alternative routes to continue forward and ultimately discover a career path that felt natural.

I viewed school as something I excelled at, something that came easily. I loved learning throughout my K-12 experience, or so I thought. I challenged myself in high school with a rigorous course load comprised of countless International Baccalaureate Programme classes. I did not feel that I had to study for exams; I absorbed the material and performed well. I was good at school; I was a good student. This mentality lasted until my first chemistry class in college.

Entering college, I was a biochemistry major, therefore my first chemistry class was early on in my undergraduate career. This was the first time I could recall struggling in school. My identity of a good student was flipped on its head. I quickly determined that I was not good at biochemistry, and it was not the major for me, as it was no longer easy. Thus, I concluded that I was not meant for a career in that field. Major change after major change, I stumbled upon a course that introduced me to the field of special education. As a product of two educators, I tried to steer away from anything remotely close to a teaching career path

because I did not want to live in their incredibly successful shadows. However, stepping into my first field experiences that year allowed me to ground myself into something that felt comfortable and natural once again.

Finally finding a major where I felt seen and heard made all the difference and ultimately landed me in that gymnasium hearing about a growth and fixed mindset as the faculty was being welcomed back for another school year. At that moment, I realized the mindset I had held throughout K-12 and into my undergraduate years: a fixed mindset. As soon as something was challenging, I ran for the hills. I was praised for being smart and for picking things up quickly. The silver lining in this story is that, ultimately, my fixed mindset led me to become a special educator who recognizes the importance of developing students' growth mindsets and creating spaces where students feel comfortable grappling with the pieces of their identity that create their mindsets. The winding road I took in college led me to working on this dissertation with the hope to create even more spaces for students with disabilities to share their stories and voices. None of this would have happened without the recognition of my fixed mindset and putting in the work to develop a growth mindset. The truest example of a growth mindset within my life is writing this dissertation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

At the center of this study are the voices of many incredible individuals. Thank you to all of my participants for sharing your story with me. I am honored that you trusted me to put your story into words and am humbled by all that I learned from listening to your voice. I hope that together we can continue to push for more opportunities for students with disabilities to use their voices in the field of education.

I would not have been able to complete this dissertation without the support of my committee chair. Thank you, Dr. Loyce Caruthers, for delaying your retirement just a bit longer to guide my journey through this program. The knowledge I gained from your teaching and guidance is unmatched. You were always just a phone call away and for that I am grateful. The skills and life lessons I learned throughout this doctoral program will stay with me as I continue to work towards equitable education for all students. Thank you to the rest of my committee, Dr. Dianne Smith and Dr. Dan Wartick, for your thought provoking questions and comments that pushed my thinking within this project even further.

Many have walked beside me on this journey and their support did not go unnoticed. Thank you to my husband, Marcus, for all the proofreading and late nights of sleeping on the couch while I was writing to ensure I did not have to go through this process alone. Thank you to Dr. Ashley Smith for meeting me at the library or answering a phone call when I felt lost with no idea of where to go next. I am forever grateful you encouraged me to begin this doctoral program and continue to support me. To my mom, dad, siblings, and in-laws, thank you for checking in on me and providing opportunities to take a break when I needed one. Thank you to the many, many friends that I had before beginning this program and the ones I made along the way who provided words of support and positivity throughout this endeavor.

Finally, thank you to my writing buddy, Calbert, who was with me these last nine months and gave me the perseverance and motivation to complete this dissertation in a timely fashion. I dedicate this dissertation to him.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the course of my career, I have served as a case manager to a range of 15 to 22 students with disabilities each year, for whom I was responsible for the legal aspects of their individualized education plans (IEPs) and ensuring compliance across their educational experiences. Navigating the legal framework of special education required maintaining a rigid calendar with reminders for annual IEP meetings and diligently mailing meeting notices to ensure all stakeholders had the opportunity to participate while still facilitating educational decisions. More than two decades have passed since the most recent reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Yet special education teachers, including myself, continue to navigate its legal and political frameworks, along with other regulations, to provide students with disabilities an education that meets their needs.

IDEA, a pivotal legislative framework, has entitled students with disabilities to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) since 1975 (Lipkin et al., 2015). Roughly 15% of students in the United States are diagnosed with a disability under IDEA each year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Of those students, approximately 50% qualify for special education services due to a learning disability (Whitley, 2010). Within this category, students exhibit similar cognitive functioning to their general education peers in areas unaffected by their disability, as their classification is based on unexpected underachievement (Fletcher et al., 2019). For example, a student with a reading disability can struggle with reading comprehension while performing at the same level as their same-aged peers in mathematics. Therefore, it can be assumed that students with disabilities should have the cognitive ability to understand their learning needs and be able to advocate for those needs.

However, under the IDEA of 2004 legislation, students' parents are their educational decision-makers and dominant voices until they turn 18. As a participant in a teacher-led study group in Chicago, Nolan-Spohn (2016) investigated this concern. She discovered that students, who are the focus of the IEP meeting, are allowed the least input in the decisions that affect their education. This study group raised questions about better inolving students in their educational planning process.

While IDEA has undergone multiple reauthorizations and amendments since its introduction in 1975, its core features remain unchanged. These include students' entitlement to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) and the requirement for an IEP with parental participation (Lipkin et al., 2015; Yell et al., 2017). The student's IEP supports the development of accommodations and modifications to gain access to the general education curriculum within the LRE to ensure progress on IEP goals can be attained. Additionally, IDEA includes language that requires "parent and student participation and shared decision-making" (p. 1651), indicating that schools must collaborate with the parent and when appropriate, the student (Lipkin et al., 2015). At the same time, this monumental legislation is designed to create spaces where students with disabilities can learn, the language within this key requirement of when appropriate raises concern about who decides when it is appropriate to include the student, creating opportunities for students' voices to be left out of the conversation.

A dominant assumption embedded within these special education policies is that the opportunities and outcomes for students with disabilities are instantly improved within the constructs of these accountability-marked laws (Tefera et al., 2019). However, simply enacting IDEA in 1975 did not immediately create equitable spaces for all students; there

have been several amendments and reauthorizations over the past almost fifty years to continue creating more equity for this population. Each amendment, discussed at length in Chapter 2, continued to open educational equity doors for more students with special education and related services. The most recent amendment of IDEA in 2004, mandated that schools with a disproportionate population of students in special education programming must dedicate a larger portion of funds to those services, again allowing for students to have the opportunities for their needs to be met within the public education setting.

Nevertheless, according to the National School Board Association (2019), the average graduation rate for students with disabilities was 67.1% in the 2016-17 school year and 17.5% below the graduation rate for the general education population the same school year. This discrepancy indicates that simply being identified as having a disability increases a student's chance to not graduate at the same rate as their general education peers. This trend is seen again during the 2019-20 school year, where only 76% of students with disabilities graduated high school, while 89% of general education peers graduated on time (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Therefore, a generalization can be made that there is a 13% chance of not graduating on time if a student has been identified with a disability. Being identified with a disability should not jeopardize a student's opportunity to graduate on the same timeline as their same-aged peers.

These data put students with disabilities at a disadvantage in terms of post-secondary options, creating more opportunity gaps instead of eradicating them. Federal mandates, such as IDEA, were created to enhance the educational experience for students with disabilities. Yet, the graduation rate disparity is just one indicator of the lack of academic success for students with disabilities in our current education system. A meta-analysis of the reading

opportunity gap for students with disabilities indicated a three-year reading gap between students with disabilities and their general education peers, illuminating an achievement gap (Gilmour et al., 2019). Moving away from the term achievement gap, Milner (2012) argued that this gap addressed in research is an opportunity gap created by the variance of learning opportunities for different groups of students. These issues are indicative of a broader concern—namely, the presence of an opportunity gap in education for students with disabilities. A significant focus of the IEP team should be to determine special education services that will allow students to access the general education curriculum and close this gap (Yell et al., 2019). It can thus raise the question of why there are such discrepancies in graduation rates and academic performances if students can successfully access the general education curriculum through their IEP.

In a perfect world, all students receive the equal opportunities for success. However, various circumstances in a student's life impact their educational opportunities (Milner, 2012). As educators fail to recognize the inequities within the educational system, opportunity gaps among students can exist. With the accommodations and modifications outlined in each student's IEP, they should be able to gain access to the general education curriculum. However, this is not happening. Gilmour et al. (2019) claimed that accommodations may not be enough to address the opportunity gap students with disabilities are experiencing.

In addition to these opportunity gaps, according to May and Stone (2014), students with learning disabilities often show underperformance in academics and learning new skills because of the stereotype threat they feel within academic settings. Stereotype threat is a theory developed by Claude Steele (2010), which states that feeling the pressure of a

negative stigma is brought to the forefront of your mind and hurts a related performance. Within academic settings, students are constantly receiving feedback on their performances. For students with disabilities, teachers often have lower expectations for their performances, which directly impacts their academic achievement (Dusek & Joseph, 1983; Whitley, 2010). The connection can be made that when teachers lower their expectations for students with disabilities, students are reminded of the stereotype that they are not good in school and, in turn, perform lower than their peers, even within their LRE.

As our educational system is recovering and rebuilding from the COVID-19 pandemic, a typical conversation among educators involves reengaging students in classrooms (Bhagat & Kim, 2020; Liou & Rojas, 2022). Educators often ignore the disadvantages students have incurred throughout the pandemic and lower their expectations of student learning. If there is already a discrepancy within graduation rates of students with disabilities, then even further lower expectations only increase the opportunity gap this population experiences. Generally, schools' mission statements revolve around ensuring every student receives an education. Likewise, IDEA communicates and coincides with the same messaging that every student with a disability has the right to a free and appropriate public education. However, students with disabilities do not experience the same academic success as their general education peers. Schools must allow all students the same access to a free and appropriate education. A crucial aspect of this goal is amplifying the voices of all students, including those with disabilities, to ensure their academic and social needs are met.

The Problem

Throughout the history of special education in the United States, there have been systemic power imbalances that tilt toward the adults in charge – silencing students' voices

and stealing their opportunities in the educational process. The National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) in 2012 provided information on youth with disabilities and whether their needs were being met within the school setting from 2003 to 2012 (Liu et al., 2018). The study gathered trends for students, ages 15 to 18, with IEPs and various disabilities. A key finding relevant to the problem of student voice related to their participation in transition activities or tasks completed to aid their post-secondary transition. These activities aimed to support progress in schooling, employment, and independent living post-secondary goals. These post-secondary transition goals are legally required to be included in a student's IEP before they turn 16 and are often the first time students have a voice in the IEP process (Anderson & Keys, 2019). Within the literature, student voice definitions range from simply sharing their opinions to collaborating with adults to solve problems to fully taking charge of a change initiative within the school building (Mitra, 2018). For this study, moving forward, the term voice will be used synonymously with being able to give input to guide educational experiences.

The significance of student voice, especially for those labeled with disabilities, is gaining recognition. However, Bergin and Logan (2013) warn that language choices in the IEP process can undermine student power, such as delaying the inclusion of transition plans until age 16. They also note that language ambiguity can leave students vulnerable to exclusion from the process, emphasizing the imperative nature of student involvement in IEP preparation. At the high school level, transition activities allow student voices to be present in the IEP process regarding post-secondary outcomes by dictating their desired outcomes. Again, this is often the first time student voice is included. However, Liu et al. (2018) reported that the participation of both students and parents in crucial transition activities

declined from 2003 to 2012, perpetuating the concern of a lack of students' voices in the IEP process. This decline, coupled with an overall lack of student voice, is alarming and limits possible post-secondary outcomes if students are not actively planning their opportunities.

Similarly, Lalvani (2015) explored the perceptions of 32 New Jersey parents and 30 teachers of students with disabilities through semi-structured interviews utilizing snowball sampling. The study found conceptual differences between the perceptions of parents and teachers regarding the stigma of students with disabilities. Parents viewed their children having a disability label as enacting negative stigmas, while teachers did not have the same perceptions. These disagreements led to a mismatch of expectations for the student's post-secondary outcomes and could be the underlying cause of power imbalances during IEP meetings. Lalvani only analyzed adult perceptions of disabilities and did not consider student perceptions, which raises the concern of the missing student voice in this process. This lack of student voice within the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) development process leads to a lack of student choice, as their voices are continually left out of conversations.

Educational research has linked student voice to academic benefits and better school attendance. For example, Kahne et al. (2022) analyzed Chicago Public Schools student records and survey responses to the district's 2019 5Essential Survey of 17,264 students to determine the impact of student voice within academic settings on academic outcomes. The survey, given each spring, also judged the overall school climate. The key findings indicated that students who believed their schools were responsive to their voices had overall improved academic success. These findings highlight the importance of including student voices in the IEP process, which could lead to more positive outcomes and opportunities. In contrast, a lack of student voice will continue to lead to less student choice and opportunities.

As students rely on their parents to be their educational advocate until age 18, the adult voice is heavily present within the IEP process (Rebore & Zirkel, 2000). To begin being evaluated and diagnosed with a disability, a teacher or parent must advocate for the student's learning needs. Holquist and Walls (2021) examined how adults can support student voices in educational policy spaces, recognizing that students have historically been excluded from decisions made on their behalf. Case studies and interviews of 10 students participating in student voice initiatives in Oregon were analyzed to determine how adults can shift the traditional power imbalances. Results indicated that adults in these initiatives had to actively shift their positional power to prioritize student voices, demonstrating that a change in this paradigm is possible.

Teachers are often unaware of the numerous systemic barriers in schools that hinder students' ability to use their voices (Robinson & Taylor, 2013). Namely, without interfering with the current power structures acting against students with disabilities, students must wait until they are 18 to have a voice in the IEP process. Legal mandates within IDEA require school districts to involve the parent as an equal member of the IEP team. However, there are no legal requirements to include the student in the meeting until the transfer of parental rights at age 18 (Yell et al., 2017). As students with learning disabilities enter high school, they become "more independent, with their personalities and interests, and begin to make more of their own choices about friends, school, and sports" (Pullen et al., 2017, p. 294). As students with learning disabilities transition to adulthood, self-advocacy becomes increasingly important, as their disability affects both their daily lives and academic experiences. When students are not included in developing their IEP, the ability to develop necessary self-advocacy skills is in jeopardy.

Koca et al. (2023) selected 12 female and male students, 10th, 11th, or 12th grade, with disabilities from an Istanbul vocational high school to participate in semi-structured interviews to understand their self-advocacy experiences. Through 17 open-ended questions, the researchers gathered insights into "family and school, learning styles and procedures, personal strengths, goals, disability perceptions, and rights" (p. 716). Many of the participants were able to identify personal strengths, as well as their difficulties in learning, indicating a level of self-awareness. However, only five students were aware they had an IEP, which suggests that students were not included in developing their IEP and raises concerns about their ability to self-advocate without knowing how their disability impacts their academic performance.

Self-advocacy is key to enabling students to develop a sense of control over their learning and development (Rosetti & Henderson, 2013). Additionally, students have more success in their post-secondary career path when they have developed these necessary skills prior (Reusen, 1996). Previous research indicated that involving students in developing their IEP is crucial to empowering students to advocate for themselves and develop self-advocacy skills (Van Reusen & Bos, 1994). To include this layer of student voice within the IEP process and ultimately expand opportunities for students with disabilities to develop advocacy skills, educators should consider identifying how students with disabilities experienced success in post-secondary outcomes. Listening to participants' stories and co-creating their narratives will foster inquiry and imagination about how students with disabilities can use their voices despite existing power imbalances, ultimately expanding opportunities for future students with disabilities (Clandinin, 2023).

Purpose and Research Questions

I remember the phone call as if it were yesterday. “Congratulations, you scored well enough on your exams and internal assessments to receive the International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma,” exclaimed the IB Coordinator. Scores for the IB exams are released each year on July 6th, but the coordinator receives them a day early. Each Fourth of July weekend, she would take time away from her holiday with her family and call each candidate to share the news. I looked forward to this day my entire senior year of high school. The hard work and dedication I had put in for this global diploma would finally all be worth it. Unfortunately, not every IB diploma candidate is lucky enough to get the congratulatory call, and a pit is left in your stomach just thinking about the possibility of receiving the consolation call. If the combination of test scores you received did not meet the criteria laid out by the examination committee, the call had a drastically different tone.

My brother received one of those calls two years after I received the uplifting call all graduates hoped to receive and four years after my sister received hers. He had not scored well enough to earn the distinction of receiving the IB Diploma. I was left with heartbreak for my brother as he hung up the phone that day. I watched him struggle for two years in the IB program and throughout his educational experience as he grappled with navigating the bumpy road of a reading disability. The hard work and dedication were there as he poured in hours and hours each night on homework. He had family support as our mom would receive extra copies of the books he was reading to record an audio version for him, and he would email his papers to my sister and me to proofread while we were in college. He had an entire village supporting his educational journey. However, it was not enough to receive the congratulatory call all IB Diploma candidates yearned for to culminate their high school

experience. There must have been something missing, something more that could have led to a different outcome.

The purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to listen to the stories of students with learning disabilities and shed light on their secret stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996) of how they experienced using their voices within their special education involvement, and to understand the complexities of navigating the barriers that silence their voices, limiting the opportunities available for them. As the opening story highlights, even students with all the proper support can experience diminished opportunities, and there is an unknown factor within the personal narrative of this population that deserves to be discovered. Through listening to the stories of individuals who were diagnosed with a learning disability during their K-12 experience and continued to post-secondary education or training, I hope to illuminate consistent components of their stories to determine the missing pieces that could lead more students with learning disabilities to academic success.

Cook-Sather (2006) declares that" 'student voice' as a term asks us to connect the sound of students speaking not only with those students experiencing meaningful, acknowledged presence but also with their having the power to influence analyses of decisions about and practices in schools" (p. 363). This definition will keep me grounded, as a researcher, as I am listening to the participant stories. Therefore, the unit of analysis, or according to Patton (2015), "the focus of the study" (p. 260), will be the participants' perceptions of and stories about their involvement in the IEP process throughout their K-12 schooling experience. Surveys, in-depth interviews, and reflective journals will be examined to build a three-dimensional narrative of the participants' secret, sacred, and cover stories to fully understand the phenomenon (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996).

Relying solely on the narrative inquiry tradition will allow me to dive deep into the art of storytelling and create meaning from the participants' experiences (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007). As the purpose of the study involved giving a voice to a population that has been historically silenced, narrative inquiry allows for spoken and written narratives to move across time and build meaning along the way (Squire et al., 2014). The stories collected from the participants will be considered the data set, and interpreting the story, or developing the narrative, is the data analysis (Bell, 2002; Bochner, 2001). I will rely on the collection of these stories, and the meaning gathered to create an understanding of how student voice can lead to more student choice. The definition of narrative inquiry is often disagreed on among researchers. However, they do agree that a key component is that narrative inquiry involves the experience of co-constructing narratives with the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2020).

Research Questions

The research questions are an aspect of this study that influences every other part of the design (Maxwell, 2013). As a researcher, I enter this study with a set of beliefs and assumptions to be discussed thoroughly within the following section. These beliefs and assumptions guided me to develop the research questions at this study's heart. It is significant to note that narrative inquiry revolves around a sense of wonderment and has a research puzzle framed around it, allowing for exploration alongside the participants (Clandinin, 2023; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). To frame this research puzzle, I begin with a central question and incorporate significant sub-questions to guide the exploration.

Central Question: What are the stories (secret, sacred, and cover) that students in special education narrate about using their voices in their educational experiences?

1. How do students use their voices in educational decision-making conversations?
2. What are students' most significant challenges in utilizing their voices in the IEP process?
3. What do students have to say about the support they need to have a voice in their educational experiences?

This central question and sub-questions served as a guide for the direction of the study and specific design elements. As stated in the central question, I wanted to discover students' secret, scared, and cover stories at the heart of this narrative inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly (1996) utilized these three sets of stories to contextualize teachers' stories within their professional landscape. Secret stories are only shared with trusted colleagues and tend to be more personal or private. Stories considered the politically correct way to discuss the instruction and inner workings of schools are referred to as sacred stories. Finally, cover stories are told to the public that align with the sacred stories and allow teachers to mask the more vulnerable secret stories of the profession. I aimed to translate these terms with regard to stories students with disabilities tell about their educational experiences, dig past the cover stories, and ultimately shed light on the secret stories of this population. The theoretical framework, composed of theories, concepts, and empirical studies, that deepened the meaning of their stories and served as the background knowledge for interpreting findings.

Theoretical Framework

This section laid the foundation for the necessary theories to understand the formation of this study. As described in Maxwell (2013), the terms theoretical framework and conceptual framework are utilized synonymously and are defined as "the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your research—

…a key part of your design" (p. 39). The goal of beginning with a conceptual framework is to "categorize and describe concepts relevant to the study and map relationships among them" (Rocco & Plakhotnik, 2009, p. 129). Further, Camp (2001) asserted that a conceptual framework details the structure the researcher believes best converts the natural evolution of the phenomenon at hand. For this study, the theoretical framework built an understanding of the barriers systemically created to limit students' ability to use their voices in the special education process.

The theoretical framework for this study consists of four overarching strands, building upon each other to develop an interconnected framework. To capture the complexities of stories collected from teachers within a personal and social context, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) developed a metaphor to discuss place, space, and time. In the same vein, I would like to paint a picture of a mountain to rely on throughout this theoretical framework and to develop a common understanding of the barriers standing in the way of active student voice within the special education process. This mountain will be referred to as Mount Spededemic.

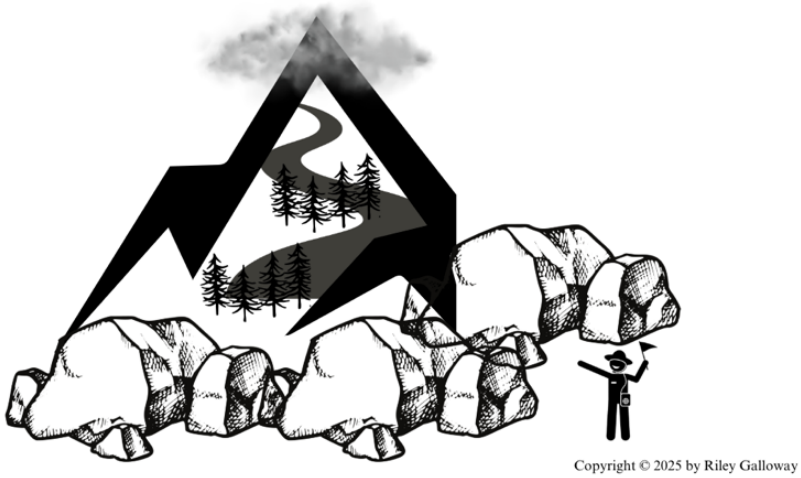
Four layers to Mount Spededemic create the complex reality students with disabilities must work through to trek along the path to the top of the mountain, where they can scream at the top and demand the education that is rightfully theirs. These aspects consist of systemic power structures, represented by boulders and addressing the historical dynamics of power that have marginalized the target population and remain prevalent today; staff stigmas, stereotypes, and a view of students, which will be seen as trees within this metaphor and represent the underlying biases teachers have about students with disabilities apparent in daily interactions and practices that need to be uprooted; students' identity development

connected to developmental stages and the role of psychological threats will be related to the fog that develops at the top of the mountain because of the ways in which these threats can interfere with students' ability to utilize their voices to self-advocate and indicating that they must navigate seeing through the fog of their identity; and suggestions for the spededemic, or the ways in which school leaders can act as a trail guide to aide in addressing these inequities and enhancing students with disabilities' opportunities to utilize their voice within the special education process at the top of Mount Spededemic.

As depicted in Figure 1 below, each strand within this framework works together to set the stage of the challenges students face as they embark on the journey to climb Mount Spededemic, with the goal being for the student to make it to the top so they can demand their rightful opportunities after accomplishing such a feat. Each aspect of the mountain will be overviewed within this section and discussed at length in Chapter 2. The goal of this section is to preview Mount Spededemic in a way that displays the inequities for students with disabilities that have led to the problem of limited voice in their schooling experiences. As mentioned previously in the chapter, the unit of analysis for this study is the stories of students with disabilities and their perceptions of navigating the special education process.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework



Grounding the theoretical framework within the definition of student voice, as seen in the literature, is vital. Student voice can have many implications and definitions in the literature (Mitra, 2018). Student voice can include simply sharing opinions or working with adults to implement change within education settings (Cook-Sather, 2002, 2006; Fielding, 2001). For the purposes of this study and theoretical framework, student voice will be referred to as the student sharing their opinions and concerns and those being listened to throughout the IEP process. As a former special education teacher and now a program coordinator within a high school, I have always worked with students with various abilities. A core aspect of my educational philosophy is that all students deserve the right to an education to reach their full potential, including having a voice in the decisions often made on their behalf. I hope to begin uncovering the layers of factors inhibiting students with disabilities from using their voices within this theoretical framework.

Systemic Power Structures

Metaphorically speaking, a boulder is seen as large, complex problems that require copious amounts of effort and resources to move. The Special Education process, particularly developing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), is infiltrated with complex power dynamics and systemic imbalances acting as giant boulders blocking students with disabilities' ability even to begin climbing Mount Spededemic. Anderson and Keys (2019) emphasized the diverse stakeholders involved in the special education process, each with a separate role. The roles included the local education agency (LEA) contributing financial resources, students offering perspectives from their educational experiences when allowed to participate, lawyers providing legal expertise, and parents expressing their love for the students advocating for their education. However, as highlighted by Tefera et al. (2019), historical barriers rooted in the sociohistorical backgrounds of special education hinder student voices and perpetuate disparities. Legislation intended to assist historically marginalized learners often falls short of its goals (Tefera et al., 2019).

The historical marginalization of people with disabilities can be traced back several centuries. According to Winzer (1993), in the 1700s, any deviation from the norm was hardly tolerated. Therefore, those with disabilities were often abused, ridiculed, and viewed as less than human. During these dark times, individuals with disabilities were denied any fundamental human rights, including education. Students with disabilities have only had the legal right to a free and appropriate education (FAPE) since the late 1970s (Lipkin et al., 2015). Prior to this time, schools were not held responsible for their actions regarding the education of students with disabilities.

Today, it is required by law for all students to receive an education that fits their specific learning needs with the passing of FAPE legislation. However, there are varying understandings of the meaning of appropriate within the legal constructs of FAPE, none of which include the student's opinion on the definition. Ultimately, this convoluted understanding of FAPE can lead to different services for the same students when transferring from district to district (McGovern, 2015). In addition, it is important to note that within this legislation is an additional layer of context with the involvement of private schools. Under IDEA, a parent has the option to send their child with a disability to a private school if they challenge the public school's ability to provide FAPE for their child due to their understanding of an appropriate education (Sutton et al., 2017). This layer illuminates the ambiguity of the term appropriate even further. A singular law with copious ambiguity that was created to ensure students with disabilities receive their right to an education begins to skim the surface of the convoluted power imbalances working against those students and tilting toward the adults in the room with professional knowledge.

A historical discussion of the Board of Education vs. Rowley case conducted by Weber (2011) addressed ambiguity behind the term appropriate. As stated in the discussion, this case took place in 1982, and it was determined that an appropriate education should be one that provided some educational benefit to students with disabilities. The discussion brought attention to IDEA, at the time, to address public education institutions' roles in opening their doors to students with disabilities more than guaranteeing them a specific style of education once enrolled (Lipkin et al., 2015; Sutton et al., 2017; Weber, 2011). This case highlights one of the systemic power structures actively acting against the presence of

students with disabilities voices within their educational experiences: school systems' legal ability to manipulate the quality of FAPE.

To further expand this idea, I utilized a thought experiment to address the issue. According to Maxwell (2013), thought experiments determine possible explanations of observations by relying on theory and experience. My thought experiment was based on my years working within the field across a variety of schools and observing parents and students as they address their rights under FAPE. I concluded that appropriate education methods for students in special education vary state by state and school by school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022; Sutton et al., 2017). This scenario, among a plethora of others to be discussed in Chapter 2, raises the question of how students are expected to know what choices they have in school when FAPE may vary across the nation, lack the presence of student voice, and contains convoluted systemic structures within the special education process allowing room for the adults with more knowledge to hold the power (Mason et al., 2004). Martin et al. (1996), in an earlier analysis of historical content, revealed the lack of students' voices within this context, further revealing the relevance of this strand of the theoretical framework. Prior to the enactment of IDEA, school districts would simply refuse to enroll a student that they deemed uneducable. Without strong advocates for students with disabilities, equitable education was non-existent. Like the ambiguity in the term appropriate, it was left up to the school districts to interpret who was or was not able to be educated. Despite progress made in this area, work for complete equity in educational experiences for these students remains.

This historical marginalization of a group of people with diminished voices did not just disappear when a new law designed to create equitable education was implemented.

There are still incidents of reducing deficit language in the recent past. For example, it was not until 2017 that the marginalized term mental retardation was replaced with the more appropriate term intellectual disability. The beginning of the IDEA legislature dates back to the 70s, yet it is still an uphill battle to ensure this population is treated with equity and respect. The multitude of layers within the history of special education of systemic power structures has led to creating an arena of historically marginalized individuals with an inability to have their voices heard, which challenges procedures for establishing the least restrictive environments (Lipkin et al., 2015; Martin et al., 1996; Sutton et al., 2017; Weber, 2011).

Furthermore, more current research indicated that parents discovered that key decisions impacting their child's education have already been made without their input within IEP meetings, furthering the silencing of voices of those with less knowledge in the room (Santamaría Graff, 2021). The overarching challenge in this strand of the theoretical framework lies in dismantling these power imbalances in a way that would explode the boulders and reveal the path for students while ensuring genuine collaboration and inclusion for all stakeholders in the special education process. The power structures discussed above do not influence educational experiences through simply existing. Thus, the following section will introduce the role teachers and school staff may play in this phenomenon.

Staff Stigmas, Stereotypes, and a View of Students

Stakeholders play a large role in a child's education. Specifically, various studies underscore teacher's pivotal role in shaping students' educational experiences. Teachers can enhance the quality of instruction through curriculum development and learning experiences (Ahmad & Réhman, 2014; Dirsa et al., 2022; Imam et al., 2020; Saifulloh, 2016). Further,

high-quality teacher-student relationships can provide protective and supportive environments that socially support students so they can engage in the curriculum and take risks that result in overall academic success (McNally & Slutsky, 2018). However, teachers are working daily within the systemic power structures introduced in the previous section, which has led to a skewed view of the academic abilities of students with disabilities and has ultimately created less than adequate educational experiences for some students (Ginevra et al., 2021). This skewed view of students with disabilities is created through stigmas, or discrediting attributes (Goffman, 1963), and stereotypes, or distorted images in a person's mind (Lippmann, 1922), against students with disabilities. The views teachers hold regarding students with disabilities are comparable to the trees growing along the path to the top. Some of these trees line the path, creating beautiful scenery and shade, while others block the path entirely and need to be uprooted, and every kind of growth in between.

As students with disabilities receive FAPE in public schools, they are legally required to receive the services they need in settings with minimal removal from the general education population. In contrast, their academic needs are still being met (Weber, 2011). This is referred to as the least restrictive environment (LRE). Similar to the vagueness of the term appropriate within FAPE, this is yet another term within special education that is more cryptic than comprehensive. The LRE for each student is determined by the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team, often led by the special education teacher (Huefner, 2000). The judgment of the student's needs by the teacher and IEP team members dictates the services for the individual student and, ultimately, the LRE. Therefore, if a special education teacher has a skewed view of the student's academic abilities layered with stereotypes and stigmas, an unbiased judgment of their LRE may be in jeopardy. Concerns with LRE decisions have

consistently been a topic of court cases for the past 50 years, indicating the concern of potential biases teachers hold while determining LRE and special education services (Stone, 2019).

Throughout time, the LRE has become the setting where educators believe the student will perform best. Decisions for this setting may stem from the deficit thinking of students from historically marginalized populations, such as students with disabilities (Patton Davis & Museus, 2019). Deficit thinking leads teachers to view students in special education settings as not able to find success in mainstream environments, thus creating more restrictive environments instead of the least restrictive. As Richard Valencia (2012) explored in his book, *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice*, when the teachers involved in the special education process see their students as incapable of meeting the learning expectations in a general education setting, those students are subjected to a self-fulfilling prophecy related to their disability. Rather, teachers should highlight students' assets and strengths to clearly identify the LRE for their individual learning needs (Liou & Rojas, 2022). To identify their assets and strengths, educators must consider students' voices in all aspects of the curriculum and culture of the school. Kohn (2004) said it best with the idea that reimagining schools must incorporate new ways of teaching and bringing student voices to the center of decisions in curriculum and instruction. Educators must ensure this goal includes the most vulnerable students with special needs.

To reiterate the vital role teachers play in the education of students with disabilities, survey data collected from high school teachers in a large suburban school in Texas suggested that teachers with a special education background or experience with students with disabilities held more positive attitudes and willingness to incorporate inclusive practices

(Reusen et al., 2001). More recently, the Stigma Conscious Questionnaire-Learning Disabilities was developed by Daley and Rappolt-Schlichtmann (2018) and completed by 42 adolescents in the northeastern United States. Researchers found that being identified with a learning disability led to experiences of stigmatization, which had negative academic and emotional effects. In the same vein, Woodcock and Moore (2018) conducted observations of primary school teachers' responses to vignettes where they described students with and without learning disabilities and found lower expectations yet higher sympathy for students with disabilities. As a whole, these findings highlighted the experiences of stigmatization that simply having a label of a disability can produce within academic settings solely through the input of teachers and not seeking out the voices of students with disabilities. The next strand within this theoretical framework begins to recognize the broader effect of identification with a disability label on a student's ability to utilize their voice as the multifaceted dynamics of students' identity development are explored.

Students' Identity Development

As a substantial component of the study's problem statement and unit of analysis, it is vital to define the term student voice more precisely. According to Yannuzzi and Martin (2014), student voice is a student's ability to influence the teaching and learning they receive in the classroom. This process allows them to hold power within their education. When there is evidence of a student's voice in their education, they can develop a stronger sense of self and personal identity within the bounds of their disability. Tajfel and Turner (1979) contend that individuals should possess "a sense of belonging to a group and the attitudes and feelings that accompany a sense of group membership" (p. 303). Erikson's (1968) seminal meaning of identity formation is significant to this discussion. He adds, "[I]dentity formation takes place

through a process of exploration and commitment that typically occurs during adolescence, and that leads eventually to a commitment or decision in important identity domains" (p. 303). Branje et al. (2021) more recently pointed to the important identities of “gender identity, ethnic identity, religious identity, and (mental) illness identity” (p. 909) which contribute to agency with narratives of personal identity that differ across these domains. This discussion brings attention to the importance of this adolescent time frame for students with disabilities to build agency. Caruthers and Friend (2016) infer that special education students and other students, in general, may experience a lack of agency. They state, "Although students comprise a majority of the school community in terms of their numbers, they are an oppressed group with limited agency because they are dominated by the adults who are in positions of power” (Caruthers & Friend, 2016, p. 199).

The formation of students' identities in the face of a historically stigmatized term, such as disability, has limited current research. Mueller (2019) conducted semi-structured interviews with four male freshmen identified as having high-incidence impairments to have a student-centered conversation about stigma awareness and disability knowledge. The conversation was juxtaposed with a collection of literature that non-disabled researchers and practitioners have criticized as stories told about persons with disabilities rather than primary sources, highlighting a gap in listening to students with disabilities' stories. Mueller presented disabled students as the ones who decided how they defined themselves by their voice. While each student dealt with the stigma associated with their disability classification in a unique way, all students were aware of it. Within this theoretical framework, the pieces of the students’ identities will be viewed as the fog at the top of Mount Spededemic. Students must

find a way to see through the fog through identifying with what makes them unique to see clearly at the top of the mountain and be able to use their voice.

In the same vein but extending back even further in relevant research, Koomen (2016) analyzed a case study of a seventh-grade African American male, called Wizard, who held many attributes common to those who are over-represented in special education to highlight the power of listening to student voices with stigmatized educational experiences. The goal of the study was to gain insight into inclusive educational experiences through interviews, classroom visits, and student work samples over the course of 13 weeks. Findings showed differentiated instruction based on students' strengths and interests, ultimately suggesting that such instructional changes were key to supporting all students in an educational setting. The value of consulting with students in the learning process was illuminated through this case study.

Likewise, similar positive results of student voice were reported for a surrounding community of schools. Through another case study, Quinn and Owen (2016) investigated an approach to student leadership within the community of an Australian Elementary school consisting of 250 students. Multiple data sources, with focus groups being central, were gathered to analyze the role of student voice within a leadership program. The analysis of collected data found multiple benefits to the use of student voice. Students were able to develop self-esteem as well as a sense of civic efficacy for community engagement. Building a sense of self-worth through empowering students to use their voice can have insurmountable impacts on their opportunities.

Research discussed within this section has consistently emphasized the crucial role student voice can play in shaping self-identity formation, particularly for students with

disabilities. Further, the importance of online and offline platforms to allow students to explore and affirm their identities through utilizing their voices has been highlighted by the increased availability of social media for students with disabilities (Kohli & Atencio, 2023; Miller, 2017). Similarly, Rooney (2019) underscored the importance of student disability services and a more socially just framework that values student self-determination through a small-scale qualitative study at a university in Australia. Opportunities for students with disabilities to hold ownership of their identity development are crucial for the long-term success of these students (Fleming et al., 2017; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017; Kubiak, 2017). There is power in listening to the voices of students with disabilities in shaping how they view this identity marker and, ultimately, how they view their educational experiences.

This discussion began with illuminating the historical marginalization of special education students and the power dynamics within the field that block their paths to the top of Mount Spedeemic. Relevant research was analyzed to indicate how the power dynamics have created stigmatized and stereotypical views of students with disabilities, ultimately resulting in a skewed view of students held by their teachers that are barriers to their trek to the top. The studies reviewed within the first three sections of this theoretical framework suggested that the failure to establish supportive learning environments for these students has affected their success in K-12 schools and post-secondary experiences. Similarly, it was brought to attention that the lack of student voice in this area restricted opportunities for teachers to value the assets of students with disabilities and inhibited students' ability to form positive self-identity within their disability label, often resulting in the inability to see clearly at the top of Mount Spedeemic. As depicted through the analogy of the mountain and the name, an epidemic is created. As with the definition of epidemic, this widespread occurrence

of unjust circumstances for students with disabilities holds a negative connotation. The following section will make the claim that leadership at the school and district levels plays a significant role as a trail guide to improve students' abilities to tackle Mount Spededemic and serves as the final strand of this theoretical framework.

Suggestions to Climb Mount Spededemic

School leaders are at the heart of educational change (Munby, 2020). As schools continue to make instructional changes to improve learning environments, there is an apparent need for strong school leaders to ensure the changes are implemented and long-lasting. The most effective school leaders have a thorough understanding of the context of their buildings and can demonstrate responsiveness in all areas (Harris, 2020). This concept can be related to the problem of incorporating student voice in the special education processes, which is the focus of my research. School leaders must have a complete grasp of the context of the special education services within their buildings and an understanding of the historical underpinnings of systemic barriers to ensure success for all students with disabilities, not only in the specific terms of the instruction they receive but also their opportunities to self-advocate. Without such an understanding, they would be ineffective trail guides, and students with disabilities would be left alone to climb Mount Spededemic.

To further this idea of the necessity of school leadership to influence instructional decisions for this population and be equipped to guide students on this journey, Rigby et al. (2020) conducted an eight-year longitudinal mixed methods case study, consisting of audio recordings from workplace meetings and quantitative data from social networks, to analyze the instruction of middle school math teachers within a large U.S. urban district. The analysis revealed that school leaders were able to guide conversations during workplace meetings

away from standardized tests and to conversations revolving around classroom instruction. Overall, the study indicated that school leaders had an influence on instruction within the school through teacher conversations, laying the groundwork for the realm of influence school leaders can hold within the building.

Special education teachers often act as case managers for students with IEPs (Belknap & Taymans, 2015). As discussed in a previous section of the theoretical framework, teachers of these students can hold skewed views of students with disabilities' capabilities because of negative stigmas and stereotypes surrounding the population (Ginevra et al., 2022; Huefner, 2000; Patton Davis & Museus, 2019). The idea of the teacher in charge of determining services and supports holding implicit biases of a student with disabilities can result in a power imbalance within an IEP meeting. This predicament leads to the first of several suggestions to help students climb this mountain. School leaders should utilize their realm of influence to equalize the potential power imbalances within IEP meetings, creating a space for the students to have a voice.

Continuing this discussion within the context of special education, Frost and Kersten (2011) explored principals' perceptions of their duties as instructional leaders, specifically for special education teachers. Surveys and interviews were collected from 132 Illinois elementary school principals with varied years of experience and levels of degrees held. The study found that principals holding special education certificates had more involvement and influence with the instructional decisions of special education teachers. A subset of principals who did not hold special education certificates had a high level of involvement in special education teacher instruction but did not feel prepared with the appropriate understanding to support these teachers fully. This study further illuminates the need for an experienced

instructional and educational leader within the school's dynamics of the special education department to support students with disabilities.

In my personal experience, school leaders fill the Local Education Agency (LEA) role within IEP meetings. This role supports the student receiving the appropriate services within the school building (Ahearn, 2006). Therefore, having school leaders with a special education certificate or experience is another suggestion that may improve many facets of the opportunities students with disabilities receive (i.e., instructional experience and special education services) and eventually the Spededemic. Chapter 2 will further discuss the necessity of school leaders in resolving circumstances to allow for increased student voice within the special education process through the lens of three kinds of leadership related to the layers of Mount Spededemic: transformational, instructional, and servant leadership.

The main goal of the theoretical framework was to highlight the beliefs and assumptions I bring to the proposed study, which led me to identify the four topics that guided my underscoring of theories, concepts, and empirical literature surrounding the lack of student voice in the special education processes. The focus of a narrative inquiry should not only be on the individual's experience but also on the, "social, culture, and institutional narrative within which individuals' experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 42), and the theoretical framework, outlined above, begins setting that context. The topics of Systemic power structures, Staff stigmas, stereotypes, and views of students, Students' identity development, and Suggestions to climb Mount Spededemic will be the focus of the literature review and will be used to create meaning from the collected data of stories of prospective participants to enhance student voice within special education. This study will utilize the data gathered from multiple sources

to be discussed in the following section and expanded in Chapter 3 to make sense of students with disabilities' stories and provide an explanation surrounding the phenomenon. An overview of the design elements for the proposed study follows.

Overview of Methodology

This narrative inquiry study explored the stories and lived experiences of participants to generate an understanding of the complexities involved in students with disabilities utilizing their voices in their educational experiences. Grounded in Dewey's theory of experience (1938), narrative inquiry is "an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding" (Clandinin, 2023, p. 7). Through this theoretical tradition, I hoped to honor the lived experiences of how students with disabilities use their voices in their educational experiences while navigating the research puzzle.

Prior to the term narrative inquiry, Todorov coined the term narratology in 1969 (Patton, 2015). However, this term did not gain popularity, and this style was thus considered narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry researchers collect data within three dimensions: temporality, sociality, and place thus creating a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space (Clandinin, 2023; Seiki, 2014). It is not abnormal for narrative researchers to move seamlessly within timelines when reporting on the narratives within their data. Stories hold a lot of importance within this qualitative research tradition as the researcher works alongside the participant to co-create the dataset in a relational capacity. Qualitative inquiry is the most appropriate method to study the phenomenon of student voice in the context of special education as the goal is to create meaning through understanding the participants' stories (Maxwell, 2013; Moriarty, 2011; Patton, 2015). In general, stories reveal patterns in society

and shape experiences (Patton, 2015). Therefore, narrative inquiry strives to examine human lives through a storytelling lens and honor experiences as vital information to gain understanding of phenomena (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The stories of the participants of this study shed light how students can or cannot use their voices in their educational experiences. By relying solely on this tradition, I was able to deeply dive into the participants' stories and provide a space for a population to be heard that has been historically silenced.

Overview of Site

The setting for this study transcended a singular geographical location by relying heavily on social media, word of mouth, and electronic communication to gain participation from across the United States. The primary objective was to hear the stories of students who have experienced special education during their K-12 schooling and how they were able to use their voices to navigate the system, develop advocacy, and gain access to post-secondary opportunities. Due to my geographic location, as the researcher, a large percentage of the participants resided within the Midwest region of the United States.

Participants and Sampling Strategies

An important and non-negotiable layer within this study is the experience with the phenomenon. Therefore, further refinement of participants was necessary to ensure all participants have experienced K-12 special education. Participants were recruited using a mixed questionnaire consisting of Likert scale items and open-ended questions. Upon completion of the mixed methods survey, participants with rich experience in the phenomenon were selected and invited for in-depth interviews utilizing purposeful criterion sampling techniques. This included intentionally including samples that had a wealth of

information within them related to the topic (Patton, 2015; Suri, 2011). As Creswell (2013) describes, all participants should be accessible, willing to participate, and able to shed light on the phenomenon being studied.

As a type of purposeful sampling, snowball sampling was coupled with criterion sampling to ensure a plethora of phenomenon experiences within the participants. Snowball sampling entails a referral component for the participants in which each were asked to provide referrals for individuals that they know fit the selection criteria (Morse, 2010; Patton, 2015), while criterion sampling revolves around selecting participants based on a predetermined set of criteria, i.e., revealing specific information on a pre-study survey (Patton, 2015; Sandelowski, 2000). The criteria included individuals who have had experience in K-12 special education, specifically at the high school level and are 18 years old or older. Criterion sampling ensured the participants have experiences to share regarding the phenomenon while allowing for snowball sampling to build the pool of potential participants. Once I casted a wide net, based on responses to the questionnaire and considered participants' willingness to move to the interview phase of the study, eight participants were selected to further the inquiry of student voice.

Data Collection

While this study incorporated a written questionnaire survey to begin building the picture of the participants through both qualitative and quantitative questions, the primary source of data collection for the study was in-depth interviews. Still, it is important to note that these kinds of surveys provide rich qualitative data that often goes unnoticed through other data collection methods (Braun et al., 2017; Terry & Braun, 2017). Participants completed the written questionnaire survey with the option to be followed up with through

in-depth interviews after meeting the predetermined criteria. Upon completion of the in-depth interview, participants were asked to complete reflective journal prompts for further insight into their educational experiences that may not have been shared within the interview. Incorporating these three layers of data collection allowed a three-dimensional story of the participants' educational journeys to be placed within a context of their social and cultural environments (Grbich, 2013).

In accordance with purposeful sampling, participants were recruited whose responses to open-ended questions of the survey indicate their stories are rich with information regarding the phenomenon and indicated a willingness to participate in the interview and reflective journal prompts phase of the study. The interviews were recorded via Zoom, with participant permission, to ensure the notes were documented verbatim. This method allowed me to understand the participants' perceptions, feelings, and experiences related to the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2015). The goal of the in-depth interviews was to feel more like a conversation, filled with rich discourse surrounding the phenomenon, and allow for meaning making to occur together with the participant (Clandinin, 2023; deMarais & Lapan, 2003; Mishler, 1986).

The final layer of data collection was through supplementary reflective journal prompts, creating personal documents from the participants. The purpose of these prompts was for the participants to share additional information in a more flexible setting. However, according to Patton (2015), there are severe limitations to solely utilizing open-ended questionnaire responses as data, but when coupled with the in-depth interviews and journals this limitation is subdued. Again, collecting the three data sources from all the participants

allowed for three-dimensional analysis when making meaning from their stories (Clandinin, 2006).

Data Analysis

Throughout narrative inquiry, the researcher spends a large amount of time gathering stories from participants to utilize as data. These stories span a wide array of topics. Typically, they are stories about "formal education and planned program experiences and outcomes, as well as informal experiences of daily life, critical events, and life's many surprises as they unfold in particular situations, contexts, or circumstances" (Patton, 2015, p. 128). After collecting the data through transcribing the interviews, the researcher spends time analyzing the data for patterns and themes. The patterns and themes are utilized to create a narrative and ultimately meaning from the secret, sacred, and cover stories students tell.

The narrative research process is collaborative in nature (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) and it is important for participants to feel a sense of equality, caring, and connectedness within the process. Their voices are heard as the researcher listens to them tell their stories. There is also a sense of mutual storytelling and restorying throughout the data collection. Data can be collected from a variety of sources, including but not limited to field notes, journal records, interviews, storytelling, letter writing, and other written documents. Throughout the data collected, the research must discern the main "I" of the narrative and keep it consistent.

According to Patton (2015), the main challenge within qualitative data analysis is finding creative ways to synthesize the data and present the findings. The data collected above through purposeful sampling can be cumbersome, and it is not easy to sift through to determine the trivial and significant pieces. Therefore, software to aid in the analysis process

that now exists will be utilized. However, with only eight full data sets from the participants, analysis by hand proved to be the most productive way to synthesize the data. The transcriptions of interviews, along with the personal journals, field notes, and memos for data interpretation were compiled together and viewed as individual, three-dimensional stories.

The overall goal of the data analysis process revolves around "reducing the volume of raw information, sifting the trivial from the significant, identifying significant patterns, and constructing a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal" (Patton, 2015, p. 521). This will be completed through heavy reliance on the works of both Clandinin & Connelly (2020; 2023) and Grbich (2013) to construct three-dimensional narratives within their social and cultural contexts. As data was collected from participants, it was referred to as field texts or records from the research field including the responses on the survey, in-depth interview transcripts, and participants' written responses to journal questions. These field texts were converted to interim research texts through narratively constructing the story and allowing for participants to continue co-creating their story with open dialogue in this process. Finally, interim research texts were converted into research texts through a less intense relational way of living with participants, while still allowing for the composition of their narratives to be a negotiation process. It is important to note that final research texts do not have final answers as the main goal of narrative inquiry is to express the secret stories, rather than answer questions (Clandinin, 2023).

The construction of the research texts was gleamed from all three data sources of the participants referenced above. Again, analyzing the multiple data sources collected from each participant allowed for their stories to become three-dimensional throughout this process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It was within these final research texts that data will be coded

to allow for natural themes to emerge and be restoryed in a way that sheds light onto the phenomenon. This coding process is described at length in Chapter 3. Unlike other methods of qualitative research, this coding process leaned more towards wondering and imagining alternative possibilities and less to generalizations and certainties (Clandinin, 2023). Finally, a key component of the data analysis process was to ensure reflectivity and reflexivity as I monitored and adjusted throughout the process (Patton, 2015). As a researcher, I have communicated personal ties to my research, and it is important for me to maintain reliability and trustworthiness of the data (Grbich, 2013). These personal ties involve family, as well as my previous role as a case manager for students with disabilities which enhances the personal significance of this research.

Significance of the Study

As mentioned previously, when students turn 18, they become their legal educational advocate. For some, this can occur while they are still in high school, further expanding the need for a strong student voice within the IEP process. At this point, the educational decision-maker required to attend IEP meetings is no longer the parent; it is the student. The typical, mainstream teenager may be excited to have more control and independence as this is an age where teens are thriving for more control over their lives (Dempsey, 2020; Scales et al., 2011). However, with all the legal jargon in the special education arena already creating barriers for parents to maintain equal participation in the IEP process (Rosas & Winterman, 2014), students are not equipped to advocate for themselves within this setting. In my experience as an educator and as made evident within the literature, there have been too many times that students are not prepared to take over their educational decisions when they turn 18 (Cook-Sather, 2006; Demetriou & Wilson, 2010; Quinn & Owen, 2016). There could

be several explanations for the inadequate preparation for this exchange of power for students with disabilities, but the limited opportunities for students to practice using their voices is the relevant piece to this study.

This problem heightens if or when the student attends college. According to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), once a child turns 18, a university cannot release educational information to the parent. Therefore, it becomes solely the student's responsibility to obtain accommodations and modifications in college. College students with disabilities are not only navigating living independently but also taking full ownership of their educational experiences, a drastic change from previous schooling for these students. In high school, students have counselors and case managers who advocate on their behalf, but after graduation, they can no longer do so (Ratts et al., 2007). Without opportunities for students to practice utilizing their voice during their K-12 experience, students are set up for failure. While there are approaches to building student advocacy while in high school, if students with disabilities do not have the opportunity to practice utilizing their voice in the K-12 setting, then students may not be able to exhibit the skills on their own when necessary.

Every student is different; thus, exploring commonalities of students with disabilities' stories who have found academic success through voice and those who have not could lead to their replication. Qualitative research is essential to this study as it will allow those unable to advocate for themselves in the past to share their voices and experiences. Inquiring about the relationship between student voice and participants' post-secondary outcomes will contribute to creating wonderments related to the inclusion of student voices within special education contexts, which may lead to changes in practices (Clandinin, 2023). As the goal of qualitative

research is to understand phenomena from open-ended responses through making sense of collected data, generating alternative possibilities, rather than theory testing, is more appropriate (Clandinin, 2023; Kuczynski & Daly, 2003). Holding a space for a historically marginalized population to share their stories could allow more students to reach their full potential upon graduating high school and reshape their narrative.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The right to an education is a basic, fundamental right across the globe, however over 240 million children worldwide are not receiving access to that right due to various social, economic and cultural reasons (UNESCO, 2023). Moreover, there are power imbalances at play throughout the history of special education in the United States, specifically, that allow for students with disabilities to be a part of the children not receiving their basic human right of an education, to the fullest extent possible (Kahne et al., 2022; Lalvani, 2015; Liu et al., 2018). As mentioned in Chapter 1, the purpose of this narrative study was to provide a space for students with disabilities to have a voice in adding to the body of literature of educational supports that need to be in place for all students to find academic success through the collection and analysis of their stories. Since the COVID 19 pandemic, academic achievement has become more of a priority for school leaders, advancing the necessity of this study (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). All students in the United States have the right to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE), and I believe it is the duty of all school leaders and teachers to prepare students for limitless possibilities.

However, not all students with disabilities find success within their education experience, as discussed in Chapter 1. This concern led me to consider what barriers may be standing in the way of students with disabilities' opportunities for success and what tools students with disabilities that have been able to find success are utilizing. Part of my educational philosophy is that all students can learn when provided with appropriate accommodations and modifications in the classroom. With this mindset, it is indicative that students with disabilities and Individualized Education Plans (IEP) that meet their learning

needs should be successfully engaging with the general education curriculum. Yet, that is not the case (Cameron & Cook, 2013; Debbağ, 2017; Francisco et al., 2020). Therefore, there must be a web of barriers for students with disabilities to successfully access the general education curriculum.

I created the metaphorical Mount Spededmic outlined in Chapter 1 that students with disabilities must climb to be able to shout from the mountain top and gain their rightfully deserved education. The barriers surrounding power dynamics influence every single layer of educational structures and create the boulders at the base of the mountain (Cooc & Kiru, 2018; Cook & Friend, 2010; Torres et al., 2019; Zagona et al., 2019). School staff work within these power dynamics while bringing in their own beliefs and influences based on personal identity and experiences into the educational buildings while lining the path that students must navigate through to the top (Brady & Woolfson, 2008; Clark, 1997; Gibbs, 2007; Kagan, 1992). Students receive their education from the aforementioned school staff while they grapple with the development of their own identity and work towards seeing themselves clearly at the top of the mountain (Leu, 2020; Mueller, 2021; Schmitt & Goebel, 2015). Finally, school leaders play a role in actively working against these barriers to improve educational experiences for all students (Tan et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2024; Wu & Shen, 2022). Thus, my four literature topics for this chapter include: Systemic Power Structures, Staff Stigmas, Stereotypes, and Views of Students, Students' Identity Development, and Supporting the Climb of Mount Spededmic.

A review of the literature was conducted utilizing several databases: EBSCO, Google Scholar, ERIC, and Education Full Text (H.W. Wilson). The works included in this review

incorporate both qualitative and quantitative studies, relevant books and reports, as well as meta-analyses and journal articles defining relevant educational theories.

When searching within Google Scholar, the original search term was simply *student voice* leading to 20, 800 results within the last 10 years. More specific search terms were included within advanced settings that illuminated a more notable gap in the research. These search terms included: *power structures* with 3,360 results, *teacher attitude* only produced 289 results, *teacher perception* with only 772 results, and *student agency* yielding 4,330 results. Incorporating the search term of *special education* to these previous searches dropped the previous results to 858 for *power structures*, 152 for *teacher attitude*, 454 for *teacher perception*, and 1,090 for *student agency*. Similar trends were seen within EBSCO. Results included 20, 272 results when only searching *student voice*. Narrowing the search with the same additional terms were as follows: *power structures* - 182 results, *teacher attitude* - 596 results, *teacher perception* – 412 results, and *student agency* – 728 results. Incorporating the search term of *special education* to again dropped results to one result for *power structures*, 31 for *teacher attitude*, 21 for *teacher perception*, and 10 for *student agency*. Specific to the research project, the search terms of *student voice* and *special education* were combined to focus the results. Google Scholar produced 11,100 results, while EBSCO only indicated 704 results. More decrease in results were seen across ERIC and Education Full Text with 132 results and 107 results, respectively. These results indicated a lack of research within these topics when specifically combined with special education students.

Moreover, when the search term of *academic achievement* was included in the narrowed searches described above, the result lists drastically decreased even further to 500 results within Google Scholar for *power structures*, 103 results for *teacher attitude*, 349

results for *teacher perceptions*, and 635 results for *student agency*. EBSCO only resulted in one result across all search terms, ERIC yielded one result, and Education Full Text did not produce any results. This further refined search indicates an alarming gap within the literature.

Students in special education have the right to FAPE and should be involved in programming that allows for academic achievement, if that is appropriate for their skillset. For example, you would not have a goal written on a second-grade level when the student is working through the fifth-grade curriculum (Yell et al., 2017). However, a lack of rigorous studies exploring the educational experiences of students with disabilities leads me to believe it is not a prevalent thought within educational research today. An even more drastic exponential trend was noted when the additional search term *of post-secondary* was incorporated. At this point, Google Scholar was the only database worth continued search due to previous result numbers and the combination of the new search term alongside *power structures* only yielded 173 results, only 28 results for *teacher attitude*, 108 for *teacher perceptions*, and 219 for *student agency*. A majority of the results were dissertations indicating a notable gap within the current literature. Again, students with disabilities have the right to an education, just as their peers without disabilities, and should not be limited out of academic programs that increase their opportunities for post-secondary success. A lack of studies within the area of *academic achievement* and *post-secondary* programming in relation to student voice allows room for the current study to be relevant and build upon the current body of literature discussed in detail within the following sections. To visually construct the components of Mount Spededmic, each section will begin with a metaphorical explanation of

the layers that create each barrier to students with disabilities fully utilizing their voice before moving into a discussion of the supporting literature.

Systemic Power Structures

The term *boulder* has often been used in thought experiments to represent mindsets that are challenging to disrupt as seen within the Sisyphus metaphor (Apollodorus, 1921; Homer & Fagles, 1996). When faced with a problem, metaphorical boulders are what block forward progress - immovable, giant rocks with no way around. Within the context of this study, boulders are present at the bottom of the mountain, blocking access for students with disabilities to begin climbing to the top. Without heavy machinery, the act of moving these boulders can seem unfathomable. Embarking on the trail would take a great deal of effort and force to break apart these boulders to begin the journey. If a student with disabilities has to get to the top of the mountain to be able to successfully utilize their voice and be heard, the first step is to move these boulders or systemic power structures standing in their way.

In the realm of Special Education in the United States, these boulders are ultimately a result of the existence of common misconceptions that are grounded in a widely held false belief, or a myth. I propose referring to these occurrences as *mythconceptions* as this word combines the two concepts and emphasizes the falsity of a simpler misconception. As noted by Hornby and Kauffman (2023), one of Special Education's biggest myths is that full inclusion is the only method to bringing true social justice to this population. They also propose that this myth must be actively challenged and dispelled to allow for continued development of theory to guide what is best for students in special education. Similarly, Krimm et al. (2023) claim misconceptions regarding neurodevelopment disorders are pervasive and persistent, creating concerns within the diagnoses of disorders like dyslexia.

Combining these two ideas into the term mythconception will allow for the discussion of the issues that have infiltrated the systemic power structures and have created barriers for student voices along the way. In this sense, mythconceptions are more than a skewed belief or a misunderstanding; they are deeply grounded beliefs that have created large boulders impeding students' abilities to have the education they deserve. These mythconceptions are woven into many aspects of special education, including the *selection process within special education*, the structure of the *special education program*, and *stakeholder involvement,* which have ultimately become the sub-topics within this section. Within this topic, I will articulate the mythconceptions relevant to the systemic power structures of special education, revealing the ways in which these have created boulders for students with disabilities.

The literature was searched with the terms *student voice* and *power structures* resulting in studies revolving around the importance of student voice within social justice issues, mostly exploring race. However, this study focuses on the social justice of special education specifically, therefore I added the search term of *special education* and *identification process* to narrow down the results. As stated in Chapter 1, the unit of analysis within this study is post-secondary high school students, ranging from age 18 to 35, who had experience with the IEP process, therefore student voice remained a vital search team within the current literature. Narrowing the search terms in this way resulted in only one study, illuminating a gap within this area of the literature that the current study will be able to address.

Special education, while designed to ensure that all students, regardless of their individual needs, receive a free and appropriate education (FAPE), is subjected to systemic power structures that can inadvertently perpetuate inequalities. This discussion aims to

address the mythconceptions that allow these inequalities to remain present within special education. The mythconceptions are:

1. Improving the language of special education legislature creates improved education for students with disabilities.
2. Federal mandates allow for students across the country to receive the same support.
3. Implementing an IEP automatically means a student with disabilities' needs are met.
4. The IEP process is a collaborative process.

These mythconceptions play a role in crucial aspects of the special education structures, such as the selection process for students with special needs and the overarching legislative framework governing Special Education across the United States (Albanesi & Sauer, 2013; Bal et al., 2014; Qu, 2015). It is vital to unravel these systemic pieces to confront the inequities that persist and understand how special education legislation shapes the overall experiences of individuals with disabilities as the structure of special education programs is often misunderstood (Lipkin et al., 2015; Sanches-Ferreira et al., 2013; Zeitlin, & Curcic, 2014). As seen through the literature below, special education comprises a myriad of classes, meetings, and supports that can vary significantly due to resource allocation and individualized needs. Similarly, stakeholders in Special Education, including educators, parents, and students play a pivotal role in shaping the landscape of special education experiences for individual students (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis; 2013; Vicente & Revilla, 2022; Woods et.al, 2018). As a whole, this first literature review topic seeks to challenge these prevailing mythconceptions and lay the foundation for a more comprehensive

understanding of the systemic power structures within the history of special education, selection process, special education program, and stakeholder involvement. I begin this discussion by briefly addressing the historical context of special education.

Special Education through a Historical Lens

A fundamental right in the United States is that all men [people] are created equal. However, throughout the history of special education in the United States of America, individuals with disabilities have been viewed as having no benefit to society allowing that statement to appear misleading. According to Neuhaus et al. (2014), the laws of any nation reflect societal values, therefore the question is raised of if all men were actually created equal if individuals with disabilities were often pitied, ridiculed, and viewed as needing medical care or a cure. Throughout the 17th and 18th century, they were subjected to living in almshouses or institutions to keep them from the public eye and were even sterilized as they were devalued as humans and believed that they could not contribute to society. Consequently, children with any type of disability were excluded from the public education system during this time.

The 1800s began to bring a glimmer of hope in the form of progress within the education opportunities for students with disabilities. Institutions for sensory disorders, such as blindness or deafness, began to surface as an option for families, but only if they had the financial means (Torres et al., 2017). Having money, a symbol of power, quickly laid the groundwork for boulders to form at the bottom of Mount Spededemic and act as a barrier to educating students with disabilities during this time. Not until the mid-1900s was there any evidence of school reform that indicated a change in societal thinking for students with disabilities (Neuhaus et al., 2014). Currently students with disabilities receive FAPE with

Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) under the most recent reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA). The current progress made towards an equitable education for all students with disabilities did not occur overnight. This slow progress has only allowed the boulders or barriers to grow larger and become more immoveable as special education legislation evolved to a more inclusive state.

The first instance of legislation considering that all students should have equal opportunities, regardless of financial means, was encompassed within the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965 and laid the framework for many early special education laws (Torres et al., 2017). However, it was not until the Education of the Handicapped Act of 1970 that first established the identification category of learning disability (LD), a crucial element to the unit of analysis within the current study. A few years later, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 addressed the discrimination of individuals with disabilities and Section 504 of this legislation is still in use today. Additional political weight was established through an amendment of the Education of the Handicapped Act of 1983, in which incentives for pre-school early intervention and transition services for students with disabilities were established. Just three years later, another amendment lowered the age of special education eligibility before encompassing all the previous amendments into the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990. Furthermore, a reauthorization of IDEA in 1997 allowed for more descriptive IEPs to guide instruction. Finally, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), currently being used today, included a change in the methods to identify individuals with LD. These ever-adapting legislations appear to have improved the educational opportunities for students with disabilities creating hope that the boulders at the bottom of Mount Spededemic may not be as challenging to

move as originally thought. However, peeling back the layers of the systemic power structures and discussing the mythconceptions currently present in today's special education system through current literature will illuminate the genuine occurrences for these students.

Selection Process in Special Education

As introduced above, the current reauthorization of IDEIA provided a change in the eligibility determination of learning disabilities (LD) at a federal level. Now, much of the eligibility determination for the LD category is left up to the local education agency (LEA) utilizing a response to intervention (RtI) approach and adding greater flexibility within the diagnosis or non-diagnosis (Torres et al., 2017). This can ultimately lead to inconsistencies in the ability to receive services and support across districts and states, shedding light onto the next mythconception that students across the country are receiving similar supports for similar disabilities. Through a case study narrative, Torres (2017) demonstrated the detrimental effects of this inconsistent layer within the systemic structures of special education identification. As students transfer from district to district, even within the same state, special education eligibility can be accepted or rejected based on the LEA's individual decision-making processes. A student can quickly go from receiving services and support for a learning disability one week to a member of the general education population the next. To examine the ability of the updated federal eligibility guidelines to produce consistent results, Hunter et al. (2023) conducted a dual predictive design study hypothesizing that both level of academic performance and rate of improvement would be able to predict IEP team decisions regarding eligibility. Data were collected from the most recent evaluations of students in grades two through four receiving tier three intervention in a large suburban school district in a U.S. Mid-Atlantic state and students in grades two and three receiving intensive general

education reading intervention across 19 elementary schools in a Midwestern state. Results within both studies and datasets indicated lower levels of performance having a predictability factor for a LD diagnosis but not a students' rate of improvement on interventions. The authors indicated several interpretations of this finding, including school teams may be relying on the long-established metric of a discrepancy in performance level rather than the subjective analysis of a student's rate of performance. However, if schools are utilizing a student's rate of improvement on interventions (an RtI approach) to determine eligibility, this study indicated inconsistencies within that method to diagnose a learning disability. Additionally, schools could only be referring their lowest achievers for special education, allowing those that are showing some rate of improvement to remain without the additional support of an IEP with the mindset of do not fix what is not broken, creating a skewed view of utilizing this metric. Without strong stakeholder support pushing for an evaluation, students making just enough progress with tier three intervention may slip through the cracks and only receive adequate support rather than the support they need to reach their full potential due to these inconsistencies.

These systemic power structures creating inconsistencies are not limited to the judgment calls of the LEA and IEP teams to diagnose learning disabilities under IDEIA. There are similar inconsistent procedures for the identification of special education services in general. A meta-analysis synthesizing the current research associated with the disproportionalities in special education within international contexts illuminated disparities within the United States special education population (Cooc & Kiru, 2018). In total, 19 articles met the parameters required for analysis, including K-12 populations, and focused on multiple student groups conducted in countries within Asia, Africa, and South America. Two

rounds of analytic coding revealed ethnic minority students were overrepresented within special education globally. Similar to Kalyanpur's (2008) observations in India, the analyzed studies highlighted the influence of cultural barriers and concerns about stigma, with the additional impact of societal hierarchies (Cooc & Kiru, 2018). A majority of the studies alluded to the underlying structural inequalities within society and schools as the cause of this overrepresentation within special education. More important to the current study, the studies analyzed and illuminated the challenges in defining disability within the parameters of cultural biases and inconsistencies of current diagnostic tools.

Discrepancies in special education enrollment by certain student groups have been well documented in the United States (Artiles et al., 2010; Blanchett, 2009; Dunn, 1968; Heller et al., 1982). According to Lisa Delpit (1986), within schools it is the middle-class population that is seen as the culture of power and determines the set of rules that students must follow to find success. As educators, if we assume all students enter school with the same skill set as middle-class students, we are continuing the system of oppression that causes marginalized students to be overrepresented in special education. Others have agreed that the extent of inequality or the ability to obtain an education is influenced by broader societal environments and established institutions, which have historically restricted opportunities for marginalized students (Artiles et al., 2011). This being that when students are not behaving like the dominant culture expects, they are referred to an evaluation process for special education that diminishes their voices and opportunities while filling their minds with comments of underperformance and lack of ability that restrict their right to FAPE.

A specific concern within these disproportionality trends in special education is the possibility of discrimination or bias in how children are identified for services (Losen &

Orfield, 2002). To understand the assessment instrument decision-making process when evaluating students with learning disabilities, Rueter et al. (2019) conducted semi-structured interviews with eight Texas school evaluators. Findings suggested that evaluators utilized a wide array of factors when selecting assessment instruments to evaluate students with learning disabilities. These included classroom experience, extensiveness of the instruments, the culture and climate of the school, and individual child needs. The factors of culture and climate also played a major role in the evaluator's decision-making process. These findings illuminated the areas where inconsistencies within special education evaluation can lie and adds support to the mythconception of students receiving similar supports within federal mandates.

Blanchett's (2009) meta-analysis of the relationship between special education and the re-segregation of African American students, 60 years after the *Brown* decision, pointed out the disproportionate number of African American students and other marginalized students in special education. At the higher end of the achievement perspective is the disproportionate number of Black and Latinx students in gifted education programs. Ford (2014) brought attention this issue 20 years ago, she wrote, "at least one half million African American and Hispanic students combined are not identified as gifted" (p. 145). More recently, a descriptive study examined the underrepresentation and misidentification of Latinx students across the United States within gifted education programs in Title 1 schools (Gray & Gentry, 2024). Results indicated that while the Latinx population continued to grow within these schools at a distortional rate while the representation of this population in gifted education programs moved in the opposite direction. The authors suggest that there is a misidentification of these students within Title 1 schools and indicates evidence of

discriminatory practices and policies. If schools are inconsistent with the tools used to evaluate, then there is a lack of reliability within special education diagnoses across districts and states, resulting in unjust educational experiences.

Similarly, Reddig et al. (2024) found that the overrepresentation of Black male students within special education may stem from the expectations and implicit biases teachers hold in classrooms about how students are expected to behave which led to Black male students not receiving the help they needed in the classroom and a lack of a sense of belonging for these students. The awareness Black students have about their race and the impact it can have on their schooling can influence their academic achievement and ultimately lead to an over identification of disabilities for these students. The assessment tools used to diagnose the need for special education lack culturally appropriate measures that can interpret ability, achievement, and behavior consistently across diverse student groups (Coffey & Obringer, 2000; Hosterman et al., 2008).

A widely accepted idea, or another mythconception, is that young people are not able to articulate and advocate for their own interests and needs and are therefore left out of many conversations and decision-making within schools in relation to the selection process of special education (Charteris & Smardon, 2019). According to Hargreaves (2004), young people can take a more active role in their education through teachers becoming more attentive to what they have to say about their experiences, leading to increased student engagement and motivation. At its core, student voice is “the involvement of young people in school and community leadership to ensure that youth can inform, participate in, and/or lead the decisions that impact them on a daily basis” (Brasof & Levitan, 2022). With the increase in student voice research in recent years, educators have been able to see the power in

listening to young people's needs and challenges in improving education experiences, however there is limited research of this topic with specifically special education students. Correia et al., (2022) conducted open-ended interviews to investigate how secondary special education students in China perceived their learning experiences, social experiences, and opportunities to use their individual student agency. Five students, three male and two female, who attended an inclusive secondary school and were diagnosed with dyslexia, participated in the open-ended interviews. Findings indicated mixed perceptions on the outlook of educational experiences, but all students viewed their learning as challenging. Beneficial learning support was received from their teachers; however, all the participants shared that they were not involved in any of the decision-making regarding those supports. Additionally, not a single adult discussed the implications of the dyslexia diagnosis with the participants following their evaluations. This study not only illuminates the lack of student participation within the special education selection process but also brings into consideration the presence of student voice within the structure of an individual building's special education programming opportunities.

Structure of Special Education Programming

A student's IEP is developed, reviewed, and revised through IEP meetings in accordance with IDEIA. Sections within the IEP are the student's present levels of performance, annual goals, progress on goals, related or supplementary services, level of participation with general education peers, projected beginning and end dates of any special education services, accommodations and modifications, and transition plans for post-secondary life. These IEP meetings are an opportunity to utilize the expertise of the team members in the room to provide the best possible educational experience for the student

(Reiman et al., 2010). According to Cook and Friend (2010), providing FAPE to students with disabilities can be a complex process, but it should be collaborative among all team members, all working towards the common goal of meeting the needs of each individual student. With this in mind, it can be assumed that the IEP adequately supports the students' unique academic progress. However, this is an example of a mythconception within the special education process that will appear evident through the literature that follows, bringing to light many aspects of the IEP process that are not supportive of the individual student due to the many convoluted layers and limited intentionality of incorporating student voice within the process.

Implementing an IEP does not automatically mean a child's needs will be met. According to Goodman and Bond (1993), "[T]he IEP was never intended to specify what or how teachers should teach" (p. 408). The original purpose of the IEP was to ensure accountability in services through insisting on individualized program planning, however educators often interpret the document as a guiding force behind their instruction of students with disabilities. Over the course of IEP implementation, special education has ironically become difficult to be flexible and individualized. Historically, IEPs have been designed to allocate aides and resources. A review of literature conducted in New Zealand analyzed 319 sources across the world, with 62% coming from the United Stated, to determine the effectiveness of IEPs (Mitchell et al., 2010). The review revealed several critiques of IEPs, especially within the United States. An alarming critique being that IEPs often have multiple purposes which have led to an unproven efficacy of the document. The review also recognized the need for students to be involved in the planning process to the maximum

extent possible. Additionally, the review recognized that while IEPs may vary in name across contexts, the structure remains the same.

To continue this idea, Skaff et al. (2016) explored the effectiveness of Individualized Learning Plans for all students in schools in the United States. While IEPs or Individualized Leaning Plans in this case, were originally designed with the overall goal of creating a more personalized learning experience for students with disabilities, this study revealed the opposite. Focus groups and surveys of 1,117 parents and 484 educators across three states indicated a disconnect between the college and career readiness efforts for students with disabilities and without received through their Individualized Learning Plans. Notable findings included concerns with how often students were involved in the development process and appropriateness of services between student groups. Findings also revealed that these plans were not sufficiently tailored to meet the needs of students with disabilities, according to parents and educators. The act of creating an individualized plan is not enough to ensure students with disabilities' needs are being met in the school setting.

Despite the original intent of IEPs to not be designed for instructional purposes, others have since defined an IEP as a "written curriculum-based pedagogical document, intended to support a student's learning process and growth" (Räty et al., 2019, p. 25) insinuating that the document should be able to guide instruction and meet students' needs (Ninkov, 2020; Xu & Kuti, 2021). To determine the extent to which IEPs provide teachers with practical methods to meet students' needs, 112 IEPs from Germany were statistically analyzed to determine methods of proposed supports (Koßmann, 2022). Descriptive findings indicated that methods to support students in the classroom were a part of almost every single IEP analyzed, however the descriptions of these supports were often too vague to ensure

teacher implementation, thus dispelling the mythconception of having an IEP equating to needs being met even further.

Turning now to an additional layer of the special education process that continues to shed light on the falsity of an IEP ensuring a students' needs are completely met: the IEP team. The IEP team is composed of parents, at least one administrator or LEA, a regular educator, a special educator, an individual to interpret the results (oftentimes the special educator already present), and any other related service member based on the students' needs (Huefner, 2000). As special educators are often the team members to interpret the results and data within the IEP meeting, the preparation to do so is brought into question. Special educators are often the leader of the IEP meeting and in turn ensuring students' needs are being met as a result of the process. The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) requires special education professionals to have the ability to collaborate with all team members in culturally responsive ways to address the needs of a wide array of students (CEC, 2016). Failure to do so could jeopardize the ability of a students' IEP to meet their needs.

To explore the effectiveness of special educators' training to complete this aspect of their job, Beck and DeSutter (2020) conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 special education professionals responsible for facilitating IEP meetings in three upper Midwest school districts across elementary, middle, and high school levels. An overarching finding was that the participants did not receive explicit training on how to facilitate an IEP meeting during teacher preparation programs. This ultimately led to facing several difficulties when they were expected to have this knowledge during the early years of their professional careers. One such difficulty was the disagreement between team members regarding necessary special education services and supports. When team members cannot come to an

agreement and the individual responsible for leading the meeting does not feel equipped to do so, the appropriateness of the selected services for the individual child can suffer or be called into question. The lack of support for special education teachers in preparation for holding a meeting with such strong legal implications continues to illuminate the concerns within the existing systemic structure students must move through to receive FAPE (Collins et al., 2017; Fuchs et al., 2017; Jones & Peterson-Ahmad, 2017).

To reiterate, historically, teacher preparation programs have not had a strong focus on preparing teachers to lead IEP meetings effectively (Kolstoe, 1970; Shepherd et al., 2016; Zagona et al., 2017). Relying on questionnaires and cross-sectional screening methods, Nur Akçin (2022) explored the special education preparation for 1000 teachers, a majority female, between the ages of 20 and 60 in Istanbul, Turkey. Findings revealed significant challenges in IEP meeting process, specifically the level of involvement of team members, an overall lack of cooperation between team members resulting from ineffective communication, limited knowledge and skills for parents and other team members, and unrealistic expectations for the students. Significant to the findings was a lack of student involvement reported by over half of the participants. While the Nur Akcin (2022) study was conducted outside the United States, findings were similar Beck and DeSutter's (2020) study which raised concerns about systemic issues to support students through IEPs. According to Rosas and Winterman (2014), IDEA is based on a true collaborative team, but these two studies indicated that the IEP teams are not always prepared to be collaborative. When coupled with the studies discussed above the lack of training in special education teacher programs appears to be a catalyst to that problem. Further exploration of the systemic changes designed to include or exclude parents and students as key stakeholders may further

illuminate the creation of boulders impeding students' journey to the top of Mount Spededemic.

Stakeholders

As highlighted in the previous discussion parent and student involvement within the special education process is likely to be limited or non-existent partially due to a lack of teacher training within the special education process. Methods to communicate properly and professionally with parents while still involving them in the IEP process is not taught within teacher professional development programs (Woods et al., 2018). From personal experience, I can speak to practicing the process through mock IEP meetings, but the refinement of parent communication processes was ultimately left up to the mentor teacher within practicum experiences, which is not consistent for each student teacher. Within this context, the reality is that without the involvement of these key stakeholder voices within this process, dialogue becomes a "hierarchical, one-way, teacher-centered, anti-dialogical approach" (Taylor & Robinson, 2009, p. 168) and does not support the true collaborative nature of IEP meetings. This mindset towards education places educators at the center of the decision-making process and leaves the parents and families to simply receive those decisions, similar to a medical model philosophy. Parents have expressed concern with this model, describing this process as educator-driven with recommendations based on teachers' input and data (Kurth et al., 2020; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014) and leaving little room for them to contribute their opinions (Mueller & Buckley, 2014, Reiman et al., 2010). Common knowledge within the field of education is that parent involvement and participation as stakeholders in a child's education can enhance students' academic outcomes. To emphasize the need for stakeholder involvement within this area, parent involvement within the IEP process is legally required

through IDEIA; therefore, it would seem expected that special educators would do everything in their power to include the parent within the IEP process. However, that is not the case. Another mythconception within the systemic structure of special education relates to the involvement of parents and students and the true nature of the collaborative process.

While IDEIA is based on the idea of a truly collaborative team, challenges are evident in practice. Ruppar and Gaffney (2011) reiterated the importance of the collaborative nature of annual IEP meetings, alluding to the potential lifelong consequences these high-stakes meetings have for children with disabilities and their families through a case study of a five-year-old, Aaron who attended a Midwest rural public school. The researchers utilized observations, interviews, and documents to understand the discourse that occurs within IEP meetings and the decision-making process. The researchers found that communication involving IEP team decisions happened behind closed doors not at the actual meeting. The conversations that occurred prior to the meeting dictated a lot of the actual IEP meeting decisions, leaving out the parents' and the students' voices and input and creating an exclusionary practice. From personal experience, I have seen a multitude of IEP meetings where the case manager already knows the desired result through pre-meetings with select team members. The decisions that result from the IEP meeting ultimately dictate the educational experience of a student with disabilities and should not be predetermined prior to the IEP meeting in order for it to be a true collaborative process (Fish, 2008; Hammond et al., 2008; Woods et al., 2023; Yell et al., 2020).

Another exclusionary practice that challenges the concept of collaborative IEP teams revolves around the reading level of materials provided to parents. To examine the accessibility and readability of published special education documents, Rosas and

Winterman's (2014) analyzed documents from all 50 State Departments of Education websites and determined the reading level of special education documents using Fry's Readability Index: including narratives from sample IEPs and handbooks/manuals. Adult reading level was determined by examining two national data banks of the current literacy level and educational attainment of adults in the United States. Analysis found that parent facing documents appeared to provide a surface level of understanding within the current literacy level of adults, but the level of literacy proficiency required to interpret the documents independently was much higher than the literacy level of the adult majority. These findings raised a major concern about the ability of a collaborative team within the IEP process. The reading level of special education documents can be seen as an exclusionary barrier for parents to fully participate in the process (Burke & Hodapp, 2016; Mandic et al., 2012; Trahan et al., 2018). At an increased proficiency level, parents need the special education professionals to interpret the language of the documents for comprehension which creates an automatic power imbalance.

To push this idea even further, immigrant families may already have a language barrier in addition to being less familiar with the U.S. special education system, having less access to health care, and might avoid services due to the stigma of a disability (Baker et al., 2010). Researchers have documented that parents perceive the need to learn about special education law in order to successfully participate in the special education system for their children (Fish, 2006; Mueller & Buckley, 2014). The question is then raised of what procedures are in place to include all parents, no matter their reading levels or backgrounds, to ensure information is not being withheld through the unequal power within the IEP team's varying levels of knowledge.

The federal government is required to report data on parent involvement to the Office of Special Education (OSEP) within the Department of Education. There are 20 indicators laid out for states to report on, one of which, indicator eight, is "the percent of parents with a child receiving special education services who report that schools facilitated parent involvement as a means of improving services and results for children with disabilities" (OSEP, 2011, p. 107). To explore the challenges in interpreting the accountability data reported and investigate the variability of reporting data from state to state, Elbaum (2014) analyzed summary information collected from states' reported data, specifically on indicator 8. Annual Performance Reports (APRs) were obtained from the annual indicator reports to the OSEP from 2008–2011. Within this data set, 11 states were created into a subset to analyze due to the ability to separate out the preschool and K-12 populations. Through an online search, information was gathered to include descriptions of survey tools or questions, evidence of the reliability and validity of said tools, the number of parents invited to complete the survey, and the standards applied to communicate metrics within a specific K-12 population. Findings indicated that there was a large discrepancy across states for parent involvement if the data was reported accurately. Some states reported as little as one in five parents, while others reported almost every single parent was involved. This large discrepancy between states indicates that the data for indicator eight, parent involvement within special education, cannot be taken as straightforward as intended. The federal government uses the data collected to identify low performing states within this area, however, without consistent methods to measure this indicator across the country, legitimately low-performing states may be able to cover their lack of parental involvement in special education. One such way to skew this data could be using a level of complexity

within a simple survey and not making that known to parents or supporting them within the completion of the survey. Their answers could also be interpreted in a way that sustains them at their current level of involvement rather than at an increased level. These potential scenarios create an unforeseen barrier for parents within the IEP process contributing even further to the mythconception of IEP teams being purely collaborative.

A key component of the IEP meeting is the selection of services, goals, and supports. Ideally, conversation occurs between team members to decide these pieces. Through the studies within the prior section, it was discussed that special education teachers may not be fully prepared to facilitate that conversation and ensure a collaborative team (Kolstoe, 1970; Nur Akçin, 2022). Without the dialogue occurring at this level, there is concern about how special education services are put into place to support students. Zagona et al. (2019) conducted interviews and focus groups sought to understand how goals, supports, and placements were agreed upon within IEP meetings and why schools do or do not implement the agreed upon elements of the IEP. In total, 18 parents and guardians participated in the study, all but two of whom were mothers of students with intellectual and developmental delays. All parents had children with K-12 experience, ranging from 6-20 years of age. Interview questions were derived from a larger sample survey and were the same questions addressed within a focus group. Findings suggested that parents often felt it challenging to be heard in IEP meetings, describing and expressing concerns to receive services for their child like a full-time job. Many participants discussed the disagreements in IEP meetings led to ultimately feeling like their child's needs were not being addressed in the least restrictive environment. While there were some positive experiences shared that cannot be ignored, the overwhelming mixed reviews of experiences did not lead to an overall positive mindset for

parents within IEP meetings. Many shared experiences included being met with predetermined services the school personnel planned ahead of time, rather than allowing the meeting to be a true collaborative process as outlined within IDEIA.

Bringing the conversation specifically to the high school level, one of the most impactful decisions made at an IEP meeting revolves around transition plans. According to IDEA, once a child turns 16, a transition plan encompassing post-secondary goals within education, career, and independent living must be included in conjunction with the IEP. Trainor et al. (2016) conducted a secondary analysis of the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS2) to examine the quality and characteristics of transition plans for nearly 11,000 students with high-incidence disabilities. The researchers further analyzed the transition plans of 2,400 key students with learning disabilities, emotional disabilities, or attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder to determine the role stakeholders played in developing these transition plans. Nearly one-fifth of the students involved in the study played little to no role in the development of their transition plan. **S**imilarly, about one-third of parents desired more involvement in the transition planning process. This is alarming due to the direct influence the transition plan has on the student and again bring attention to a lack of collaboration within the IEP team. Transition plans should not only prepare students for their lives after high school but also consider legal factors in their education. If student voice is missing from the process and parents are not able to advocate effectively for their students, concern is raised about the livelihood a student has after high school due to a lack of collaboration in the IEP meeting.

On the other side of this argument, there are parents of children with disabilities who are receiving positive experiences with their involvement in the IEP process. Francis et al.

(2016) conducted a study in which parents of children with and without disabilities described their positive relationships with school personnel through the school culture, leadership, opportunities for family involvement, and overall positive partnerships. Positive experiences for some parents across the United States should not be ignored within this discussion of literature, but in the same breath, the alarming amount of literature to the contrary cannot continue to go unresolved. An important component of this discussion is that parent involvement does not equate to parent engagement (Fenton et al., 2017). Reynolds (2010) made the distinction between the two terms within her work, indicating that involvement refers to school-structured activities and an invitation to parents to participate. Engagement, on the other hand, encompasses more self-directed relational activities between parents and school personnel, allowing parents who normally take initiative to structure their own interactions with the school while still providing support for parents who have a more passive side to interacting with school officials. Research has indicated that teachers prefer the more passive involvement of parents and could develop biases to continue the systemic structures in special education that inhibit parent involvement, but especially engagement (More et al., 2013; Harry, 1997; Harry & Kilngner, 2014; Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012).

Over the last few decades, there has been an increase in research acknowledging that teachers can improve current educational practices and school structures through listening to student voices and perspectives as key stakeholders (Rudduck & Flutter, 2004). Through the studies discussed above, it is clear that special education within schools is saturated with unjust power structures and systems that limit the opportunities for student voices to be heard and create boulders at the base of the mountain they must climb to reach their opportunities. There is potential in incorporating student voice to disrupt and expose the systemic power

structures within education; however, as mentioned in the introduction of this section, when the search term of *student voice* is included with *special education*, results drastically decreased indicating a lack of research within this area. A qualitative study, relying on interviews and focus groups, added to this small body of literature and examined the disproportional distribution of student voice among Australian primary school students (Finneran et al., 2021). Data from 24 participants allowed the researchers to suggest that students do not feel socially entitled to use their voice within the context of school; rather, they viewed it as a gift bestowed to a few privileged students who are aware of their relative privilege within the school context. Students not believing they have the right to use their voice within the school context raises concern specifically for students in special education since students within the U.S. become their own educational decision-maker at age 18. If students view using their voice as a privilege and not a right, it raises the concern of whether they will have received the preparation needed to take over their educational decisions. This also highlights the idea that there are systemic structures in place within education globally that have led students to view the use of their voice with a diminished outlook. Student voice, within itself, is a complex concept that is influenced by many factors within a school building.

Summary

This first topic focused on the concept of systemic power structures within special education in the United States that have created boulders at the base of Mount Spededemic through the existence of mythconceptions. The mythconceptions explored included: (a) improving the language of special education legislature creates improved education for students with disabilities, (b) Federal mandates allow for students across the country to

receive the same support, (c) Implementing an IEP automatically means a student with disabilities' needs are met, and (d) the IEP process is a collaborative process. The metaphor of boulders blocking a path to represent these power structures was used throughout this first topic. Students with disabilities must overcome these obstacles to have their voices heard and receive an appropriate education. The boulders are formed through three main areas of the selection process, structure of special education programming, and stakeholders. All were explored at length within the current literature. The topic concluded by highlighting the need to dismantle these systemic power structures and create a more equitable and inclusive educational experience for all students with disabilities. The importance of student voice throughout the process was emphasized. To fully understand how student voices may appear within the current study, I will continue to explore the ways in which school staff, specifically teachers, interact with students in relation to their personal stigmas, stereotypes, and sense of students with disabilities in the following topic.

Staff Stigmas, Stereotypes, and a View of Students

Upon deconstruction of the systemic power structures that created the boulders at the bottom of Mount Spedemic, an entrance to the path becomes clear. Students can now embark on their journey to the top where they can use their voice to advocate for their needs. Climbing a mountain is no easy feat. A clear path to the top is helpful, but additional roadblocks create more barriers along the way. Picture a scenic forest trail. Trees can provide beauty along a scenic trail, providing guidance on the shape of the path and shade from the beating sun. However, there may be portions of the path that have overgrown trees that need to be trimmed back or trees that have grown to completely block the path that will need to be uprooted before continuing up the mountain. These trees symbolize teachers and the views

they hold for students with disabilities. Some teachers have the mindset that allows them to be able to support and encourage all kinds of students on their trek up the mountain. Others hold on to negative stigmas and stereotypes that do not allow for students with disabilities to hike effortlessly, which are the trees that need to have those beliefs uprooted to allow for forward progress. This section will explore the creation of the stigmas and stereotypes teachers internally hold on to regarding students with disabilities and address how the ways teachers view students with disabilities plays a role in their ability to have their voice heard in their education experiences.

The dynamics of stigmas and stereotypes school staff hold surrounding students with disabilities have profound implications for their educational expectations. As explained by Pingani et al. (2016), stigmatization downgrades individuals to a status deemed less desirable, resulting in their isolation and marginalization. Utilized as a working definition, this perception of stigma shapes attitudes and behaviors into stereotypes, influencing the academic environment for students with disabilities. In the realm of education, stigma is intertwined with prejudicial attitudes and negative treatment toward individuals possessing characteristics perceived as dangerous, undesirable, or unworthy, as in the case of the present study, students with disabilities (Major & O'Brien, 2005; Thornicroft et al., 2007). Shifrer (2013) notes that despite the legal frameworks discussed above designed to protect students with disabilities, persistent stigma and inequality continue to hinder the learning experiences of those with learning disabilities (LD), specifically. Such hindrances often stem from misconceptions and stereotypes of students with LD, leading to misguided assumptions that confine them to more restrictive learning environments than necessary. Furthermore, Shifrer emphasizes that both parents and teachers harbor lower academic expectations for students

with LD compared to their peers who achieve similar academic success. This discrepancy in expectations exacerbates the challenges faced by students with disabilities. Unbiased assessments are a crucial element in fostering adaptive teaching, yet current research suggests that teachers, at times, fall short in forming adequate assessments of students' needs based on perpetuated stigmas and stereotypes (Ready & Chu, 2015; Ready & Wright, 2011; Rubie-Davies, 2015; Schneider, 2005).

As I delve deeper into this literature review, it will become apparent that addressing staff stigmas, stereotypes, and the way they view students with disabilities is paramount for creating an inclusive educational environment. Figure 2 below depicts the conceptual framework of how school staff stigmas against students with disabilities can lead to the way they view the students within their classrooms developed from the pygmalion effect developed through Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) self-fulfilling prophecy experiment. The systemic power structures discussed at length within the previous section have laid the groundwork for stigmatized beliefs of students with disabilities to be present and relevant. Without actively working against the stigmatized views of students with disabilities, internalized beliefs can be built from these stigmas and ultimately lead to stereotypes being created and sustained. While these stereotypes can be positive or negative depending on the experiences of the individual teacher, holding onto negative stereotypes allows for an augmented sense of students with disabilities, ultimately stealing their educational opportunities.

Figure 2

School Staff Conceptual Framework

While searching the literature related to this topic, an overwhelming percentage of results landed in two categories. Relevant literature was either relating to pre-service teachers or a systematic review of the recent literature within the field. For example, in terms of pre-service teachers, the literature showed teachers developing their beliefs surrounding students during their teacher training programs (Součková, 2020; Vidović & Domović, 2019; Wall, 2016). In terms of literature reviews, findings suggest that negative stereotypes lead to negative views of students with disabilities (Denessen et al., 2022; Kimball et al., 2016; Toutain, 2019). Seeing a majority of studies involving pre-service teachers leads to the conclusion that biases towards the target population begin within teacher preparation programs. However, alongside the large number of literature reviews as relevant studies, it illuminates a gap within the research that the current study will look to address. The following topic will build on the idea that the ways in which teachers view their students with disabilities are deeply rooted in negative stereotypes that are built from stigmatized beliefs about the population. The conversation will also leave room for the continuation of how this blatant concern can be mitigated within the fourth topic of this review, discussing how school leaders can foster a more equitable and supportive learning atmosphere for students with disabilities to utilize their voice.

Stigmas Stemming from Beliefs

From the working definition of stigma discussed above and represented in seminal literature, it can be concluded that teachers' beliefs may influence their behavior within their classroom, their teaching practices, and ultimately their expectations of students with disabilities (Brady & Woolfson, 2008; Clark, 1997; Gibbs, 2007; Kagan, 1992). Further, the beliefs teachers hold when they enter the classroom can lead to setting fewer goals and have implications for future academic achievements for these students (Good & Brophy, 1997). This raises particular concern when teachers hold less than positive attitudes towards these students with disabilities, specifically alongside the educational policies of inclusion discussed within the first section for this literature review. Center and Ward (1987) found that a majority of teachers expressed general agreement with policies of inclusion at that time but were only willing to accept the inclusion of students with mild disabilities and less cultural stigmas. While the research to support these claims about stigmas is older, the views expressed will appear continuously relevant through the discussion of recent empirical studies throughout this section.

Building upon this seminal understanding of stigmas and their potential impact on teachers' beliefs and behaviors, it is crucial to acknowledge the repercussions of these stigmatized attitudes on the academic trajectories of students with disabilities. The beliefs that teachers bring into the classroom can significantly influence their instructional practices, goal setting, and expectations for students with disabilities. This section will recognize that there are stigmatized attitudes among teachers that impact students' academic achievement and begin to dissect where these attitudes develop.

Stigmatized attitudes towards students with disabilities skills in the classroom are not a new phenomenon and can lead to inaccurate placements and more restrictive environments, the opposite intentions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA). Previously pointed out, special education teachers often serve the role of case manager. They are in charge of leading Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings, involving all team members in the process, and leading the determination of services for the student. Building on the concern of special education teachers being equipped to lead those team decisions, Juhkam et al. (2022) examined the accuracy of teachers' and support specialists' judgment of students' skills to investigate the establishment of special education services within eight general education schools located in Estonia. Judgments regarding the skill level of 187 third graders were collected from 11 classroom teachers and eight support specialists through surveys, while student literacy was assessed using group and individual assessments. Through coding the judgements and assessments, it was seen that teachers were less accurate when determining reading fluency than spelling skills. Additionally, out of the 187 students, 34 were currently receiving special education services. Teachers perceived their skills within the low range/needing assistance, even when their assessment scores reflected contradictory results, indicating that a student's special education status may influence how the teacher perceives their skills and ability level. Again, holding this stigma of students with disabilities as low achievers can ultimately lead to students continuing to receive special education services when they have exceeded their need for support due to the teachers' and support staff's judgments of their skill level.

Alongside additional studies, the findings within a study conducted by Juhkam et al. (2022) support the notion that teachers make relatively few data-based decisions during their

day-to-day and instead make decisions based on their intuition and preconceived beliefs regarding students with special education services (Vanlommel et al., 2017). This idea emphasizes the importance of addressing the stigmas teachers hold for the target population. Again, as highlighted by Good and Brophy (1997), teachers entering the classroom with less-than-positive attitudes may set fewer academic goals for students with disabilities, ultimately influencing their future academic achievements. This is particularly alarming when considering the prevailing stigmatized attitudes towards students with disabilities and the broader educational policies of inclusion discussed in the previous sections of this literature review.

Based on the definition of stigma, the beliefs about a stigmatized population are inherently negative. Different cultures around the world stigmatize disabilities in varying ways. Njelesani et al. (2022) explored teachers' responses to school violence against students with disabilities because of stigma-based bullying in Zambia. Various qualitative methods, including documents, vignettes, cartoon captioning, drawings, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups, were collected from 33 teachers, 12 parents, and 90 students with disabilities within 9 different schools that offer inclusive education but vary in geography and demographics. Results indicated that students with disabilities are not safe in these schools, and teachers are not responding to the violence due to the stigmatizing beliefs and cultural norms within Zambia. Students with disabilities were blamed for the bullying and sustained the responsibility for addressing the bullying due to a lack of teacher response. The teachers with no response to the bullying participated in victim blaming, brushing off the violence because of the cultural stigmas surrounding individuals with disabilities, or had a lack of direction on how to handle the bullying. This is an extreme look at the consequences of

stigma within a school setting in comparison to what will be addressed in the current study; however, it still brings to light the detriments of holding stigmatized views of students with disabilities as a teacher. Across the globe, individuals with disabilities have been stigmatized as being less than, providing an excuse for adults to not fight against the stigmas and passively let them continue.

The question then comes to mind of where these stigmas have evolved from, especially if they are not deeply ingrained within the culture. To begin attempting to answer this question, earlier research must be considered. Relying on semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, Samsel & Perepa (2013) investigated the link between media portrayals of disabilities and the influence it holds over teachers' perceptions of students. Eight teachers working in a count in south-east England were asked about their thoughts of students with disabilities, their beliefs on the accuracy of how disabilities are portrayed in the media, and whether they felt influenced by the media within their classrooms. Results indicated that the media does play a role in informing and educating the public, a positive aspect as more teachers are aware of a varying level of disabilities. Overall, media impacts teachers' awareness and understanding, but not necessarily the way they teach or interact with students with disabilities. Seminal research exists within this area indicating that teachers have a set of beliefs or views of students with disabilities associated with their academic achievement (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Richardson, 1996; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968); however, Samsel and Perepa (2013) insists these views are not solely coming from the media depiction of students with disabilities (Gunter, 1994; Norden, 1994). This prompts another crucial question: where, then, are teachers developing stigmatized views of students with

disabilities? Stigmatized views of students with disabilities are not innate; they must be learned or acquired from some form of influence.

All teachers develop their areas of expertise through some form of teacher preparation program. While in preparation programs, pre-service teachers are exposed to field experiences that play a role in shaping beliefs. This can also be the first opportunity to have personal beliefs challenged, often occurring within course work and field experiences in actual classrooms. To assess pre-service teachers' perspectives and beliefs on students with disabilities before and after a field-based introductory course on students with disabilities, Mize and Schramm-Possinger (2021) collected daily reflections, online discussions, and attitude surveys from 91 pre-service teachers attending a midsize university within a suburban area in the southeastern region of the United States. These mixed-method data sources specifically addressed the ability of the course to change pre-service teachers' beliefs and the role that having a family member or acquaintance with a disability impacts overall beliefs. After participating in the course, pre-service teachers' beliefs about students with disabilities being better served in the general education classroom increased and overall became more positive and in favor of inclusion. Those with family members or acquaintances began the course with more positive attitudes but had no significant difference in the amount of increased positive beliefs after the course. In fact, those with prior exposure to students with disabilities were less malleable in terms of inclusionary beliefs. Results also suggested that not all experiences are equally impactful, stressing the importance for faculty members to understand more regarding the type of prior experience pre-service teachers are bringing to the course.

This study illuminates the importance of ensuring teacher preparation programs have a course with exposure to students with disabilities within general education pre-service teachers (Mize & Schramm-Possinger, 2021). Without the opportunity to challenge preconceived beliefs, teachers may be more likely to bring these beliefs into the classroom. Exposure to the benefits of inclusion allowed for beliefs to be challenged and negative stigmas to be reduced. Also brought to light is the idea that just as each student has an individual story based on their experience, so do teachers. This needs to be recognized within teacher preparation programs to ensure each pre-service teacher can have the exposure needed to enter the profession with limited stigmas and preconceived beliefs towards students with disabilities.

In summary, the literature reviewed thus far has underscored the multifaceted nature of stigmas and their far-reaching implications within educational settings. It prompts a critical examination of how teachers' beliefs and stereotypes may adversely affect students with disabilities, from lowering expectations to allowing school violence against these students to occur. Suggestions of the media building these stigmas were discussed, as well as urging the development of interventions and strategies to counteract these stigmatized attitudes for the betterment of inclusive education through preparation programs. To reiterate, stigmas are always negative and often unfair. The stereotypes that can be built from these stigmas, on the other hand, are perceived beliefs of a group of people, but they are not always negative. However, it is important to cement the idea that negative stigmas can lead to negative stereotypes within this population if teachers are not provided with evidence to counter their lived experiences. The subsequent section will continue to delve into the

formation and reinforcement of these beliefs as they form stereotypes, aiming to clarify ways to challenge and reshape these perceptions within educational contexts.

Stereotypes Built from Stigmas

To deepen the exploration of the formation and perpetuation of stereotypes, it is essential to scrutinize the origins of teachers' beliefs and how these beliefs may evolve over the course of their careers, but especially at the beginning of their careers when exposure to student demographics first begins, particularly within teacher preparation programs. Often an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or judgment of a group of people, the role of stereotypes for students with disabilities cannot be ignored within today's classrooms. According to Cook-Sather & Reisinger (2001), pre-service teachers can be seen relying on deep-seated assumptions from their own high school years to describe the stereotypes that are readily available and reinforced in their daily social interactions. This observation raises critical questions about the persistence of stigmatized beliefs and their transformation into stereotypes throughout teachers' professional journeys. The idea of pre-service teachers entering into a preparation program with stigmatized beliefs and turning those beliefs into stereotypes throughout their careers will be further discussed within this section.

Reflecting on my own undergraduate experience as a special education major, a stark contrast emerged in the exposure to students with disabilities between general education and special education teacher preparation programs at my university. The predominant focus of special education preparation programs was on courses relating to teaching students with disabilities, juxtaposed with occasional courses addressing the general education population. All the while, my peers within general education preparation programs enrolled in only one course, exposing them to students with disabilities. The exposure to this population fell on

the shoulders of the field placement experiences. This discrepancy underscores the pivotal role of teacher preparation programs in shaping teachers' abilities to reach all students, making it imperative to delve deeper into their influence on the development of stereotypes toward students with disabilities. Teacher preparation programs are the cornerstone for teachers' abilities to reach all students; thus, it is key to dig deeper into the role of these programs in the creation of stereotypes towards the target population of the current study.

As introduced above, pre-service teachers enter preparation programs with a wide array of previous exposure to and experiences with students with disabilities. One may then wonder if there is a rhyme or reason for which experiences can lead to holding on to stigmas that will turn into negative stereotypes. Crowson and Brandes (2014) delved into the complex interplay of social and psychological predictors historically linked to discrimination and stereotypes of students with disabilities. Their study explored negative stereotypes, social dominance orientation, intergroup anxiety, and self-efficacy in pre-service teachers, revealing that those with high scores on social dominance orientation were more likely to oppose inclusion. The researchers hypothesized that the opposition to inclusion for this population stemmed from negative stereotypes, social dominance orientation (acceptance or desire for a social hierarchy), and intergroup anxiety. They also entered the study believing that self-efficacy on teaching students with disabilities would be a negative predictor of the opposition to inclusion. Participants were 229 pre-service teachers enrolled in a mid-sized university in the Southwestern United States. Most of the pre-service teachers were female, with only 35 being male and only 16 majoring specifically in special education. After being recruited at the beginning of the semester, participants completed online surveys measuring close contact, self-efficacy, social dominance orientation, intergroup anxiety, negative stereotyping, and

opposition to inclusion. The study's findings highlight the potential predictive factors for opposition to inclusion, including the use of stereotypes against students with disabilities. This raises the question of whether pre-service teachers' potential barriers to inclusion could be identified and addressed at the onset of a teacher preparation program. The model the researchers hypothesized at the beginning of the study held true in that participants with a high score on social dominance orientation also scored highly on the opposition to inclusion scale. Additionally, teachers scoring higher on intergroup anxiety or stereotype use scored lower on self-efficacy to teach students with disabilities.

As a whole, the results of this study allowed for predictors of pre-service teachers who would be opposing inclusion due to a multitude of factors, one of which being the usage of stereotypes against students with disabilities (Crowson & Brandes, 2014). These results could lead to the assumption that it would be worthwhile for the inclusive movement to determine pre-service teachers' potential barriers and address them at the beginning of a preparation program. If a preparation program is aware of the predictors for opposing inclusion, then they could have the opportunity to tackle them head-on before they solidify into negative stereotypical views of students with disabilities often seen in the classroom to this day.

This concept of attempting to predict teachers' behaviors based on implicit and stereotypical views of students in marginalized student populations is not a new field of research, as indicated by the date of the previous study. To build upon this claim, a meta-analysis was conducted by Denessen et al. (2022) with the identification of research studies within the past 10 years using implicit measures of teacher attitudes and stereotypes. The search yielded 401 unique studies that were further screened for eligibility based on the

predetermined criteria of "(1) included an implicit attitude measure; (2) included preservice or in-service teachers as participants; (3) focused on implicitly measured attitudes toward specific target groups of students; (4) described an empirical study; (5) were published in a peer-reviewed journal; and (6) were written in English" (p. 3). After the screening, 49 studies were selected for in-depth analysis. The researchers relied on a "code-and-count" analysis method to answer their research interests in teacher-related factors associated with implicit attitudes and student-related outcomes associated with implicit teacher attitudes.

The review of the literature found that implicit measures of teachers' stereotypes and attitudes may be better predictors of behavior than explicit measures, such as self-reports and questionnaires (Denessen et al., 2022). While there was a wide array of ways the 49 studies decided to analyze the implicit attitudes of teachers, many studies examined whether teachers' backgrounds were predictive of teacher attitudes. Two findings from this study are intensely connected to the topic at hand: (1) Teachers had more positive attitudes and less implicit stereotypical views when they were also members of the target population, and (2) teachers who were trained or specialized to work with a certain group of students had more positive implicit attitudes toward the target groups. If educators are addressing students' needs by relying on implicitly biased stereotypes based on group affiliations, instruction becomes unresponsive to the actual needs of students. With this knowledge, teacher preparation programs could target field experiences in an even more individualized manner.

As stigmatized views are inherently negative, the stereotypical views of students with disabilities they lead to are often students who lower academic achievers. Just as there are predictors of teachers having stigmatized views that lead to stereotypes, there are factors within teachers' experiences that can result in negative stereotyping. Exploring the

relationship between these various factors that may influence beliefs and stereotypes of teachers within inclusive settings, Pachița & Gherguț (2021) utilized quantitative questionnaires among 90 teachers within mainstream schools in Romania. One questionnaire was designed to measure teacher beliefs about inclusion, while the other measured stereotypes. A majority of the teachers viewed the concept of inclusion as important; however, it was only the teachers with low levels of stereotypes towards students with disabilities who were open to the idea of including students with disabilities in their classrooms. The opposite was also seen as true through the questionnaire results. The researchers concluded that those "who report a low level of expectations and a high level of stereotypes cannot see beyond the labels assigned to children with disabilities" and are unable to see the benefits of inclusion (p. 94). Results also indicated that teachers who had experience working with students with disabilities had a lower level of stereotypical views toward those students. The years of experience teachers brought to the classroom also played a role in teachers' beliefs. If teachers have been working with students with disabilities for a long period of time without applying inclusive practices, negative experiences during their years of teaching have led to an increase in stereotypes towards the population. This insight indicated that teachers must be utilizing inclusive practices to see the benefits within the population. The mindset and beliefs teachers hold as they enter the classroom can make all the difference for students with disabilities. Holding on to negative stereotypes for students with disabilities or about inclusive education does not allow the students to experience the benefits to a full extent. If teachers continue to have negative experiences with students with disabilities within an inclusive setting due to a multitude of factors (lack of support, lack of knowledge, etc.), previously held beliefs can be solidified rather than challenged. However,

the question then arises of how situations in which teachers are supported in practicing inclusive education can be created so they can continue to see the benefits and reframe their beliefs throughout their teaching careers.

One answer to this dilemma takes the conversation back to teacher preparation programs and includes the intentional incorporation of inclusive education scenarios into pre-service teacher preparation programs. This is not a new concept, as Campbell et al. (2003) explored the experiences of 274 preservice teachers at a large Australian university in the first year of their teacher preparation program to investigate the ability of university programs to influence teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with disabilities almost two decades ago. Participants completed a questionnaire before and after their instruction and field experiences to gauge their knowledge and attitudes towards inclusive education, specifically relating to students with Down syndrome. A majority of the students had knowledge of the disability prior to their course and field experiences but viewed students with Down syndrome in a stereotypical manner. By the end of the semester, only 3% of the preservice teachers viewed including these students as detrimental to the individual and other students in the class, and 90% viewed inclusion of this demographic positively. Overall, the study demonstrated that raising awareness of at least one disability could lead to positive attitude changes towards the inclusion of all disabilities. This study highlights the need for preservice teachers to be exposed to disabilities during their teacher preparation program to combat the preconceived notions they may hold regarding ability.

In contemplating the broader consequences of teacher preparation programs, it becomes evident that school districts bear the effects of teachers' exposure, or lack thereof, to diverse student populations. Professional development programs within school districts may

play a pivotal role in ensuring that teachers' stereotypical views are continually challenged and reshaped throughout their careers. There are a variety of change frameworks that professional development programs can utilize to work alongside teacher preparation programs in continuing to challenge stereotypes for students with disabilities. One such framework designed by the Heath brothers suggests three components: evoking the elephant, or emotional side; rationalizing with the rider, or the reasoning side; and shaping the path or process to make the change (Heath & Heath, 2011). Further discussion of the potential of utilizing change frameworks within reframing negative stereotypes will be further discussed in the final topic of this literature review. Overall, a holistic approach, from initial teacher preparation to ongoing professional development, is crucial for fostering inclusive attitudes, dismantling stereotypes within the educational landscape, and allowing for a positive sense of students with disabilities within classrooms where their voices are heard and valued.

Views of Students with Disabilities

The ways in which stereotypes influence teachers' ability to teach students with disabilities, outlined above, can have lasting effects. For inclusive education to operate effectively, all teachers must believe that students with disabilities, and all students for that matter, belong in the general education classroom (Specht et al., 2016). Developing this belief in students is vital because over 60% of students with disabilities receive more than 80% of their education in a general classroom setting (Snyder et al. 2019). However, this belief does not come naturally for teachers. A longitudinal study in which teachers were asked to rate students' reading skills from first to third grade found that teachers' ratings were strongly influenced by students' past performance (Hecht & Greenfield, 2002). Other, more recent studies have revealed that teachers tend to underestimate the academic skills of

students with special educational needs or students who have previously needed special help (Campbell, 2015; Hurwitz et al., 2007; Soodla & Kikas, 2010). Relying on previous experiences to shape beliefs creates an inaccurate and inconsistent sense of students with disabilities. From my own personal experience, there have been countless times when I have heard teachers quickly group students with disabilities into a category of students with behavior problems or a lack of ability to learn content material. Whether this occurs on a small scale of teachers grouping students for classwork or on a larger scale, where students are refused enrollment in upper-level courses based on their perceived ability. For the current study, it is important to dive deep into the current research on how and where teachers develop their sense of students with disabilities.

Within this conversation, it cannot be ignored that there is some literature that shows teachers judging students with disabilities as lower achievers than their general education peers, simply by underestimating their academic abilities (Mazenod et al., 2019). If teachers enter into an inclusive education environment with the belief that students with disabilities are not able to meet the expectations, they are set up for failure from day one with the ceiling being set too low rather than setting a high bar. A meta-analysis quantifying teachers' cognitive appraisals, emotional appraisals, and self-efficacy beliefs regarding inclusive education examined the elements of teacher training programs that impacted teachers' beliefs (Dignath et al., 2022). The ultimate goal of the study was to conduct an extensive search into where different beliefs on inclusive education are developed. Analyzing 102 studies from 40 countries that met predetermined criteria allowed for 40,898 teachers to be involved in the meta-analysis. Data were coded and analyzed utilizing the Meta-Analysis Standards and the Preferred Reporting Items for System Reviews. Across all studies, teachers neither endorsed

nor rejected inclusive education, potentially because of the ease that comes with choosing the midpoint on a scale and the lack of cognitive effort needed to come up with that decision. However, results also indicated that many teachers may be holding beliefs that are interfering with their ability to use inclusive practices. Special education teachers experienced more positive cognitive appraisals toward inclusion due to their working environment, which supports the idea that teachers can be trained to become more inclusive. Yet, if teachers held more negative views towards inclusion, they were seen as difficult to reach within professional development surrounding inclusive practices. The experience of spending time in an inclusive classroom brought about a belief change within teachers as they were able to see the feasibility and desirability of including students with disabilities. Overall, this meta-analysis emphasized the importance of teachers seeing inclusion working to aid in mindset shifts. According to Garwood and Ampuja (2019), students with disabilities are at risk of developing learned helplessness and a negative self-view of their academics, therefore teachers need the tools to aid students in building positive views of their capabilities. However, if teachers are struggling holding that view of students on their own, it would be challenging to innately have those tools to help students.

On a similar note of teachers needing to see inclusive education successfully working to shape their sense of students with disabilities, Thompson et al. (2023) conducted informal observations and interviews of six teachers within an all-boys school in London to investigate this within teachers of the arts. Through a hermeneutical phenomenological lens, the lived experiences of these arts teachers were collected and analyzed. All the teachers within the study viewed their students as having unique differences and saw that their disability labels only offered a partial view of the students' abilities. Teachers within the arts

viewed students with disabilities as not a problem within their classrooms, contrary to the views of teachers of other contents within the building. The authors recognized that this mindset may stem from the notion that students with disabilities have more room to be creative within the arts and that other subjects have the ability to harness creativity, just not as easily. This study brings into light the idea of the type of content taught dictating successful inclusive experiences with students with disabilities and shaping the mindset that is held throughout your teaching career. The question is also raised about how to account for the varied experiences teachers may be bringing to the classroom.

To dive deeper into the individual experiences that teachers bring to the classroom, Gómez-Mari et al. (2022) conducted a systematic search of empirical articles to analyze the variables that influence teachers' attitudes regarding the inclusion of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder within mainstream schools. The original search of literature included 331 articles but was narrowed down to 16 studies after duplicates were removed and articles were screened with specific inclusionary criteria. Within these studies, attitudes towards inclusion were found to be contradictory and inconclusive. Knowledge, training, experience, culture, self-efficacy, and gender had the most influence on attitudes towards inclusion to varying degrees. High levels of knowledge corresponded to positive attitudes, allowing teachers to overcome prejudices and break stigmas and develop a stronger sense of students' actual abilities. Overall, results indicated that there are many variables at play when predicting a teacher's willingness to include children with disabilities. This study raises the question of how to adjust for all variables when working with teachers in a public, mainstream education setting.

Providing perspective on how different countries chose to portray inclusive education, overarching barriers, key concerns, and overall attitudes, Hollings (2021) conducted a systematic review of 18 articles on inclusive education. These 18 articles took place in countries outside of Western countries, including the Middle East, Oceania, East Asia, Eurasian/Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and Africa. Across the studies, there was an overarching need for teachers to be trained more to work with students with disabilities in inclusion settings. Commonalities also indicated that all stakeholders shared responsibility for the commitment of inclusive education. Through looking into other countries, the barriers seen within the United States in regard to inclusive education are not anomalies.

Again, it is evident that within the search of the literature conducted for this study, many of the relevant studies were systematic literature reviews. This still indicates that there is a gap in the current literature within the overall topic of how school staff view students with disabilities. The current research is also contradictory in its findings, "resulting in a sparse understanding of why teachers differ in their belief systems about inclusive education, and how teachers' training experiences contribute to their development of professional beliefs" (Dignath et al., 2022, p. 2609). There is still an apparent concern within this area, but finding relevant studies that were not reviews of past studies or uncontradictory was a challenge. Therefore, the current study holds the opportunity to shed light on this issue.

Older research indicates that education institutions have grouped students by ability, often placing students with disabilities in lower attainment level groupings, creating almost a hierarchy within students (Boaler et al., 2000; Ireson & Hallam, 2003; Macqueen, 2013). Through lower expectations of students within these lower groupings, there is often reduced access to curriculum and fewer opportunities, potentially resulting in the lack of

representation of students with disabilities within rigorous programming (Hallam & Ireson, 2005; Kelly, 2004; Oakes, 2005). Research supports the idea that students have more opportunities to learn when teachers have higher expectations of them (Rubie-Davies, 2014; Timmermans, Rubie-Davies, & Rjosk, 2018).

Examining English and mathematics teachers' expectations of high school students within lower attainment groups, Mazenod et al. (2019) coded and analyzed data generated from an ongoing mixed-methods study within state-funded secondary schools. Questionnaires gathered from 597 teachers in 82 different schools addressed their perspectives on teaching and learning in lower attainment groups. The analyzed data suggest that teachers' pedagogy approaches differed based on the level of perceived attainment of the class they were teaching. This is parallel to the findings of Hattie (2009) that teachers' practices and how they operate in the classroom account substantially for the learning and achievement of students. Teacher self-efficacy, or the belief that they are capable, is a key component of successful inclusive classrooms (Dignath et al., 2022). Without the teacher's self-efficacy in reaching students with disabilities and truly believing in students' abilities, it seems impossible for students with disabilities to believe in themselves and build a strong sense of self-efficacy on their own.

Summary

This topic focused on the impact of teacher beliefs and stereotypes about students with disabilities on their educational experiences. It argued that these beliefs and stereotypes can act as additional barriers for students, even after systemic power structures have been addressed. The metaphor of Mount Spededemic continued with the use of trees blocking a path to represent these beliefs and stereotypes. While some teachers are like supportive trees

that guide and protect students, others are like obstructions that hinder progress. The current literature indicated the following key points: (a) stigmas and stereotypes are harmful and can lead to lower expectations for students with disabilities, (b) teacher preparation programs and media portrayals play a crucial role in shaping teachers' beliefs and attitudes, (c) implicit biases may be stronger predictors of teacher behavior than explicit beliefs, and (d) collaborative professional development can help challenge and change these beliefs. To conclude, the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive environment for all students, regardless of their disabilities was emphasized. It highlights the need for continued research and intervention to address teacher beliefs and stereotypes. The next section will delve into the impact of stereotypes on students with disabilities, exploring how these perceptions influence their self-efficacy and overall educational experiences.

Students' Identity Development

While hiking to the top of the treacherous Mount Spededmic is an incredible feat in itself, students must now work to see through the fog and be able to admire the incredible views at the top. While fog is present on top of most mountains in the early mornings, the use of headlamps or lanterns can begin to break through that fog. As daylight progresses, the fog will typically dissipate allowing the impeccable views to become clear. Standing at the top of a mountain and soaking in the incredible sights can cause one to want to scream "I am on top of the world," as frequently seen in movies. For students within this metaphor, the fog is how they view their own identity, specifically their disability identity. Students must shed light onto their identity and begin to understand how it shapes how they interact with the world. They must grapple with what their disability identity means for them over time to be able to fully understand what accommodations and modifications they need to find success in their

K-12 experience and beyond. This section will uncover the layers of self-identity for students with disabilities that need to be worked through to fully enjoy the view from the top and have the urge to scream at the top of their lungs for what is best for their education and learning.

The concept of identity is a complex and multifaceted construct with deep philosophical roots dating back to Plato and Aristotle. While extensively studied in various disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and literature, a singular, definitive definition remains elusive. Key elements often identified include self-conception, social presentation, intersectionality, performance, and fluidity (Guenther et al., 2020; Rogers, 2018; Verkuyten, 2018). As a dynamic and evolving aspect of human experience, identity significantly influences individuals' interactions with the world. For students with special education needs, disability may be a central component of their identity, highlighting the critical importance of understanding how identity shapes their educational experiences and overall well-being.

To conduct a search of the literature on this topic, I again turned to Google Scholar and EBSCOhost. These two resources were selected to remain consistent with the entire literature review and because I have found them to be the most reliable in producing similar results within the search terms. To begin this search for relevant literature around this topic, I utilized the search term “identity” resulting in over 1,850,000 results. To begin narrowing down the results, I included the search term “students with disabilities” which reduced the number to 23,000 results. As I began determining potential sub-topics for this section, I added in the search term “identity development” which led to 5,560 results. Attempting to link this topic in relevance to the previous topic, I incorporated the search terms “teacher influence” and “influence of teachers” leading to only 500 results. Finally, I wanted to look at potential psychological threats of students with disabilities’ identity development, so I

incorporated the terms “stereotype threat” and “imposter syndrome” leading to 1,700 and 632 results, respectively. This search of the literature allowed me to determine where my research project may fit into this current literature, as results decreased with each additional search term added to the original two. The sub-topics and sub-sub-topics developed from this search of the literature are discussed in the following paragraph.

To ground the topic historically, key identity development theorists will be discussed and their implications for high school students. Theorists such as Erik Erikson (1968) and James Marcia (2002) provide a foundational framework for examining contemporary issues and will help establish the theoretical underpinnings of this research project even further. Within this theoretical foundation, it is also important to recognize the concept of intersectionality, as that having a disability is just one part of a student’s identity, and the case will be made that this concept plays a role in students with disabilities’ ability to develop self-efficacy (Crenshaw, 1989; Dweck, 2006; Settles & Buchanan, 2014). Following the laying of this foundation, the role teachers play in developing students’ disability identity will be expanded upon from the previous section as they ultimately hold power in the classroom and play a key role in students’ identity development within that setting (Hart & Williams, 2009; Linton, 1998). To conclude the section, influences below the surface of a student’s identity, referred to as psychological threats, will be examined to explore how the mist at the top of the mountain may be created. Specifically, stereotype threat and imposter phenomenon will be explored as a majority of the studies revolved around these psychological concepts (Grayson & Mateo, 2019; Steele, 2010). These selected sub-topics will allow for a more thorough understanding of how students have to grapple with the formation of their identity before being able to see clearly at the top of Mount Spededemic.

Identity Development

Identity development within the adolescent years is crucial to an individual's overall sense of self. Erik Erikson (1968) developed several stages that individuals work through while developing a sense of identity. Those stages are built upon the work of Freud and span from infancy to old age. While all the stages of development impact the individual's overall growth as a person, the Stage of Adolescence is the most relevant to the proposed study at hand. Erikson believed an individual's identity is impacted by crises encountered during adolescence ages (12 – 18). He argues that individuals experience intense self-exploration and questioning during this time, and identity exploration is a primary task of adolescents (Erikson, 1959; 1963; 1968). Associated with this exploration is the experimentation of various identities on the road to identity achievement (Erikson, 1950). The resolution of this crisis and self-questioning, referred to as identity achievement, can result in a clear sense of self with a stable identity or confusion and an incomplete sense of identity (Erikson, 1964). Understanding the development of identity within the adolescent stage is crucial to this study, as the purpose of this study revolved around understanding the high school experience for the participants. The following section will dive deeper into the formation of a student's disability identity before moving into how this development relates to the intersectionality of multiple identity markers and students' self-efficacy, or the ability to believe in one's ability within academic contexts.

Criticisms of Erikson's identity theory revolve around the notion that identity formation extends into early adulthood rather than being resolved at the end of the adolescent developmental phase, and similar identity crises are revisited throughout adulthood (Marcia, 2002; Schwartz et al., 2005). James Marcia (1980) expanded upon Erikson's work on identity

development, focusing solely on the adolescent age range and developing the identity status theory within adulthood. Similar to the identity exploration adolescents experience within Erikson's *identity crisis*, adults continue to engage in exploration and commitment with respect to their identity. According to Marcia (1980), achieving a strong sense of identity in adulthood is associated with greater life satisfaction and well-being.

Introduced in the 1970s, Cross's Nigresence Model serves as a framework for understanding the process of African American identity development (Cross, 1971; 1978; 1991). This model depicts how racial and ethnic identities within the United States are specifically navigated by individuals of African descent. The term "nigrescence" means the process of becoming black or dark (Parham, 1989; Vandiver et al., 2001). In relation to this theory, the term essentially means developing a Black identity. As I am unaware of the racial breakdown of my participants for the proposed study, it is important to ground the understanding around the predominant cultures of the United States and my current professional setting. This theoretical model of understanding has stages of development that individuals move through based on encounters and experiences revolving around their racial identity. The stages include pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment (Cross, 1991). These stages have been expanded on and revised since their original development, with key changes involving a sense of Black acceptance and pride rather than self-actualization in the final stage (Vandiver et al., 2001).

As seen through the theorist discussed above, it is evident that the adolescent stages of development are critical to the development of one's identity. While Cross's Nigrescence Model does not explicitly state age ranges for each stage, students may be experiencing the encounters necessary to move through the stages during that high school time frame

(Gardner-Kitt & Worrell, 2007). The proposed study will be diving deep into the participants' high school experiences; therefore, it is vital to not disregard the identity crises or racial encounters they may also have experienced while working towards academic achievement in their classes. High school students gain much more than academic content from their overall experience. In a case study of three high school gifted students in Indiana, overall high school experiences were shared to help educators adjust programming decisions (Schmitt & Goebel, 2015). Through collecting surveys and short responses from the participants, the study found that the students shared many of the same experiences revolving around academics, but each were shaped by their courses, the peers in those courses, their own view of students with high abilities, and the teachers of those courses. The overall findings suggest that the high school experiences of these gifted students not only shaped their identity in high school but also how they interacted with the world in a post-secondary setting. Previously, Worrell and Gardner-Kitt (2006) explored the impact of courses, peers, and teachers on identity within a similar time frame, hinting at the broader developmental context. These two studies begin to bring to light the multi-faceted experiences at the high school level that can influence a student's identity. The lens of intersectionality allows for a more nuanced examination of how race, gender, and other identity markers are intertwined within the academic journey and contribute to a holistic understanding of a student's identity development.

Intersectionality of Identity

The intersectionality of student identities refers to the complex and interconnected nature of various social categories and characteristics that shape an individual student's experiences and sense of self within the broader educational context (Settles & Buchanan,

2014). Coined by Crenshaw (1989), this concept builds upon the idea that a person's identity is not shaped by a single factor but rather by the intersection of multiple dimensions. For example, students with disabilities may also be women of color, immigrants, or from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Each of these identity markers contributes to their overall experience within the educational system, influencing how they navigate challenges, access resources, and perceive their own identity within the academic environment. This section will examine the ways in which students with disabilities may be feeling the influences of identity intersectionality.

To understand identity and how identity functions in society, Satterfield (2017) developed *The Iceberg* analogy to explain how multiple identity markers can impact an individual's experiences. Within this analogy, Satterfield discusses how some identity markers, such as gender and race, are visible from the surface level of interacting with another individual. However, there are many identity markers that are under the surface, such as socioeconomic status and political affiliations, and not apparent from immediate interactions. The identity markers that an individual identifies with can affect their sense of self-concept, value, and self-esteem as they interact with the invisible hierarchies in society.

The intersectionality of identity for students with disabilities is a complex and dynamic process, influenced by various factors such as LGBTQ+ identity (Miller, 2018), invisible disabilities (Sowińska, 2022), and social experiences (Ule, 2017). Filling a critical gap within the research in this area, a case study utilizing semi-structured interviews, self-identifying questionnaires, and narrative analyses explored the relationship between culture, gender, and race and experiences within the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields (Harper & Kayumova, 2022). Three multilingual Black and

Brown females from the South Coast region of the United States participated in this case study. The participants were selected based on teacher recommendations and an intensive review of their resumes, and they participated in a program titled STEAM Your Way to College. The goal of the program was to "study the intersection between language-based racialization and science identity development" (p. 1099). Data were analyzed using Saldaña's multi-cycle process of coding. The findings suggest that the racial and linguistic identities within society of the participants affected their abilities to develop a strong identity within the STEM field. Each participant's story was unique but similar in the sense that they all shared experiences of feeling invisible or lacking, which undermined their ability to grow their identity in a science field. As females of color within a stem field, they are met with conversations regarding their ability to find success that ultimately affect their ability to grow their self-esteem in the area. These participants did not share the identity marker of being in special education like the participants in the proposed study will, but had that experience been thrown into the mix, their stories may be shaped by even more interactions as they attempt to develop a sense of self-concept in STEM fields. To reiterate even further, these students often navigate conflicting expectations and discourses, both in academic and medical settings, as they construct and negotiate their multiple roles and identities (Sowińska, 2022; Riddell, 2014). Despite these challenges, students with disabilities can reshape their identities and accept their disability as part of their lives without losing their purpose or aspirations to work towards developing a strong sense of self (Ule, 2017).

Student Self-efficacy

The term *growth mindset* is not a new term in the educational field. Dweck (2006) coined the term to describe the student's belief that intelligence and ability can be developed

with effort. Within her research, she discovered that students' beliefs are impacted by their own conception of their ability and intelligence, grouping them into two categories: fixed mindsets and growth mindsets. A student's mindset is not constant. They can waiver between the two categories based on their experiences and how they view themselves and their abilities. This idea of a growth mindset is tied closely to the concept of self-efficacy. Bandura (1994) defines self-efficacy as "people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives." A strong sense of self-efficacy can be developed through four main sources: mastery experiences, social models, social persuasion, and stress reactions. All of these sources vary for each individual based on the way they interact with the world through their identity markers.

A study conducted in New Zealand expanded the understanding of the associations between gender self-confidence, life satisfaction, and academic achievement (Watson et al., 2021). Through a self-report survey, 1601 adolescents from seven economically and ethnically diverse secondary schools in New Zealand participated in the study. The survey included questions from the Hoffman Gender Scale, an adolescent stress questionnaire, satisfaction with the Life Scale, and one question to determine perceived academic achievement. The study found that students with a self-definition of their own gender identity were positively associated with stress and negatively associated with perceived academic achievement. In contrast, contentment with one's self-defined gender identity was negatively associated with stress and positively associated with life satisfaction. Therefore, it can be concluded that fostering gender-identity-safe school environments for adolescents will ensure positive wellbeing and overall scholastic outcomes. There are many layers to students' identities that need to be considered when addressing academic achievement, gender identity

being just one. More recent theories than those discussed within the first section have explored the fluidity and multiplicity of identity, treating identities as constructed and negotiated (Gee, 2000; Holland, 1998). The identity markers carried by everyone inhibit their ability to allow their identity to be created from a blank slate; rather, society influences experiences based on the identity markers held by each student.

Being labeled as a student with a disability creates an identity marker for this population. the fluidity and negotiated identities in the context of special education, Fitch (2003) observed and audiotaped semi-structured interviews to gain an understanding of the experience of inclusion from the perspective of students in special education. The study included five students included in the general education population and four students separated from the general education population, all ages 12 or under, within predominately White, middle-class elementary schools in an industrial Midwest city. All students were labeled with a developmental handicap. Fitch hoped to understand how students viewed their class placement and themselves within the school culture. None of the participants discussed their disability label and all viewed the special education classroom as a safe space. The students included in the general education environment had a stronger sense of self-confidence and it was concluded that identity formation for these students depended on how they made sense of their educational experience. This study indicates that if students with disabilities are not able to build a strong sense of self-confidence from their education experience, they cannot be expected to find academic success within the classroom, especially when considering the implications of stereotype threat, to be discussed in further detail in the following section.

Building upon this foundation, other researchers have contributed to the understanding of the complexities within special education students' ability to develop a strong sense of self. Bergen (2013) highlighted the impact of self-efficacy on the academic success, motivation, and effort of students with disabilities, indicating again that a positive self-identity can lead to stronger self-efficacy in the classroom. More recently, Michael et al. (2020) and Chen et al. (2020) both emphasized the role of personal and experience-related variables in building self-efficacy within this population. These findings, alongside the previously mentioned studies, further suggest the role identity plays in developing strong self-efficacy for students with disabilities.

As detailed above, student identities are developed in complex ways throughout stages of development and especially within their educational experiences. Individuals develop strong self-concepts through understanding the intersectionality of their identity markers and how they interact with the world. While identity is a personal matter, the factors that influence its creation are numerous. The following section will begin to explore the ways in which teachers influence the creation of student identity, specifically for students with disabilities.

Teacher Influence on Student Identity

As described in the previous literature topic, teachers attempt to support students with disabilities academically and socially through unintentional stigmas and stereotypes (Linton, 1998). Teachers, frequently nondisabled themselves (Hart & Williams, 2009), have the power to either reinforce or dismantle stereotypes about disabilities for the students they teach. In this section, I delve deeper into the multifaceted role educators play in shaping the educational journey for students with disabilities in terms of their identity development. By

examining the ways in which teachers can be instrumental in fostering inclusive and supportive learning environments, I aim to uncover strategies and practices that contribute to the empowerment of this population.

The role that the education system and teachers have in developing disability identity was explored through semi-structured interviews with nine individuals with a label or diagnosis of a disability within their K-12 experience (Mueller, 2021). Two of the participants were labeled with intellectual disabilities, two were blind, and the remaining five participants had other physical disabilities, all recruited from disability networks within the Pacific Northwest. The semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to reflect on their disability identity, their personal schooling experience, their knowledge and relationship to their disability, and any major supports they may have benefited from during their schooling experience. Data were analyzed through multiple eclectic coding cycles and indicated three major themes within the results: a lack of representation in the curriculum, a lack of disability community, and a lack of school staff with disabilities. Through the experience shared by the participants, it was concluded that teachers can influence these areas, at least on a small scale. With teacher adaptations to everyday classroom experiences, students with disabilities could build a stronger sense of identity within their disability. As mentioned above, the schooling time period for students has an impact on the way their identity is shaped and how they interact with the world as adults. Teachers have the ability to have a positive influence on that development if they are provided with the proper support.

To further emphasize the influence of teachers on students' identity development, Leu (2020) analyzed her former students' work through a form of dialogue called counter narrative storytelling to shed light on the stories of individuals whose experiences are not

often told. She explored the stories of four students who were all members of minoritized groups and had learning disabilities. The data included nine artifacts from each student, including 20 pages of written content and artwork from a literary journal class project. The artifacts were analyzed to find themes based on the research questions, including the topics portrayed in the artifacts, the ways students' identities were represented, and how success was portrayed. Major themes that emerged through the coding and analysis of the data were education, police, and rejection across three participants and future, persistence, policing, and violence across all four participants. When portraying themselves with the artifacts, the participants revealed "a willingness to learn, persistence amid difficulties, and hope for their futures'" (p. 186). This study illuminated the power of listening to student voices through the participants' ability to critique their own words and create positive identities for themselves. This connects directly to the unit of analysis within the present study: the voices of high school students with disabilities.

Connecting back to the previous sub-topic of identity intersectionality, Griendling et al. (2023) utilized researcher-developed curriculum-based measures assessing student vocabulary knowledge and a standardized measure of students' general science knowledge to determine if multimedia professional development supported the performance of students with multiple identities, including disabilities. Included in the study were 26 general education science teachers from 11 different middle schools across the southeastern United States and 1760 students. The students with multiple identities consisted of "(a) 22 students with disabilities from low SES households and marginalized racial/ethnic backgrounds; (b) 33 students with disabilities from marginalized racial/ethnic groups; and (c) 167 students with disabilities from low SES households" (p. 27). To determine the role of the professional

development program, half the teachers participated in the experimental group and received support, while the other half served as the control group. The professional development program was designed to provide teachers with the knowledge and tools to deliver science vocabulary instruction to students with and without disabilities with fidelity. Results indicated an overall stronger performance for students with disabilities, regardless of their intersectionality of multiple identity markers. This study, again, highlighted the power of influence teachers hold over shaping a students' educational experience, even when they have multiple identity markers also impacting the way they interact with the world.

As made clear within the first section of this topic on identity, all facets of one's life are shaped by the identity markers carried, especially educational experiences. To better understand the role of teacher bias in identity markers on students' academic motivation, well-being, and educational experiences, Childs and Wooten (2023) conducted an integrative meta-analysis which focused on teacher bias determined to be judgments, reactions, or behaviors made towards a topic, person, or situation as a result of underlying beliefs and assumptions. The researchers specifically wanted to determine how teacher bias is defined and measured within the United States and which student, or educational outcomes, are often associated with teacher bias. Three databases were searched for peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 to 2020, which led to the inclusion of 31 studies in this integrative review. Related to the current study, this review found teacher bias to be associated with "perceptions of students' physical appearance and personal identities" (p. 382), as well as school connectedness and belonging. In terms of educational outcomes, the results indicated an association between teacher bias and students' perceptions of their academic ability and, ultimately, their academic motivation. The researchers claimed that students' achievement

and educational experiences are foundational to fully understanding the impact of teacher bias on educational outcomes. Student voices need to be illuminated and heard surrounding this topic; thus, there is a need for the current study.

The influence of educators extends beyond imparting academic knowledge, significantly impacting how students perceive themselves within the context of their identity markers. As highlighted above, teachers serve as powerful agents in either reinforcing or challenging societal norms and stereotypes, thereby shaping the identity narrative of their students. However, there is more at play within understanding the influence of student identities than solely how teachers encourage identity development. Beyond the constructive influence teachers can employ, students may also encounter psychological threats that pose challenges to their sense of self. Through examining the psychological threats students may be experiencing in the subsequent section, I aim to broaden the understanding of the multifaceted nature of student identity.

Psychological Threats

The terms *stereotype threat* and *imposter syndrome* are related concepts, but they refer to distinct psychological phenomena. Stereotype threat typically involves the fear of confirming negative stereotypes about one's social group, leading to diminished performance (Steele, 2010). On the other hand, imposter syndrome is characterized by persistent self-doubt and the belief that one's achievements are a result of luck or deception rather than genuine ability (Grayson & Mateo, 2019). While there is not a single specific label that encompasses both phenomena, they can be grouped within the broader context of *psychological or identity threats*. This term can be used to capture the shared element of individuals feeling threatened or undermined in their abilities or identity in certain situations.

The following discussion will be broken down into the two phenomena discussed separately to illuminate the role of students with disabilities' identities.

Stereotype Threat

To fully understand the role of stereotype threat within a student's concept of identity, it is important to ground the context within an historical lens. The founding theorist of the Stereotype Threat Theory is Claude Steele. Steele's early professional career included themes of inquiry, identity, and the manipulation of self-perception. As a researcher, Steele constantly asked and answered questions that continued to lead to more questions – an inquiry cycle. This process led him to develop his theory: stereotype threat. When experiencing stereotype threat, Steele (2010) describes it as feeling the pressure of a negative stigma that is clearly brought to the forefront of your mind and in turn impacts your performance.

Prior to exploring the phenomenon of aspects of identities impacting performances, Steele researched various aspects of the self and its role in addictive behaviors. As a social psychologist, Steele became fascinated with identity and methods to manipulate one's self-perception. The beginning of Steele's academic career consisted of a much broader look at identity through psychological research into the self and addictive behaviors. Steele (1975) explored how attacking one's identity acted as persuasion to comply with a task. He found that if a part of someone's identity was criticized, they would be more likely to comply with a request that could aid in re-building the piece of their identity that was just questioned. For example, if a liberal is called by a racist and does not have the opportunity to refute the claim, they are more likely to assist in a task that would help them reclaim their identity as an

anti-racist (Steele, 1975). This study highlights the need for a positive self-identity in our society and how easy it is to manipulate someone's identity to get a desired result.

In addition to the early research into self-image, Steele explored aspects of the role addictive behaviors play into self-regulation. Steele et al. (1981) conducted a study to explore the relationship between the feeling of internal conflict and utilizing alcohol to alleviate the feelings. Participants were asked to complete biographical surveys and questionnaires and participate in discrimination tasks. The research findings recognized that alcohol is often seen as a quick fix to alleviating internal stressors but encouraged alcohol treatment programs to rely heavily on training alternative methods to handle negative internal emotions. Shortly after this study was published, Steele and Liu (1983) published a study indicating self-affirming activities are effective in reducing internal stress and conflicts. Participants again completed questionnaires and participated in attitude activation tasks. The study continued to dig into the themes of identity and manipulating self-perception. It was found that self-affirmation is key to resolving inconsistencies in one's identity, also referred to as dissonance. This early research into various aspects of self then led Steele to dive deeper into identity and the unseen aspects that impact the way individuals are viewed and view themselves. The idea of self-image and self-affirmation (identity) ultimately led to Steele refining his research to focus on the impact of stereotype threat on two main groups: (a) African American students within the educational system and (b) women within mathematics. Along with his colleagues, the cycle of inquiry Steele utilized throughout his research led to findings that have changed the way academic performances are viewed (Steele, 2010).

Throughout Steele's later research, the themes of academic insecurity and stereotype threat became more prevalent. In his book, *Whistling Vivaldi*, he explains to his readers how the experience in his early days led him to the formation of his stereotype threat theory. The problem of underperformance and academic insecurity within certain groups is what sparked his interest and began to keep him busy in his later research (Steele, 2010). When one question regarding underperformance was answered, another was proposed, and Steele continued to utilize personal experiences to inspire new questions to be explored. Because of his identity as an African American, he was not able to experience everything that he would have liked to as a child. He knew from a young age that there were stigmas associated with his race (Steele, 2010). The self-realization of his identity pushed him towards discovering reasons for performing poorly in academics due to a piece of your identity you cannot change. Experiences such as this are key to understanding the inquiry process that led Steele through his theory formation and his academic career.

As Steele continued to dig into the impact identity plays on academic insecurity, he focused on two main groups. As mentioned above, Steele and his colleagues focused on Black males, and women. Their studies began with questions revolving around underperformance. The team was intrigued by the idea that underperformance of Black males within academics did not seem to be caused by racism from teachers or students, therefore they thought there had to be another explanation (Steele, 2010). They saw a similar phenomenon with women in math. They believed there had to be an unseen pressure causing this experience. They hypothesized that there was a pressure each group felt to not self-fulfill a stigmatized mindset or a stereotype regarding their identity (Steele, 2010). Steele and his

team continued to ask and answer questions until they found results that provided reason for this underperformance.

Furthermore, the studies conducted by his lab often had a group of people, with a negative stereotype regarding their identity, complete an academic task, specifically math tasks for the women participants. The studies found that if a group was made aware of the negative stereotype that was directly connected to the academic task they were about to complete, they would perform worse than their peers and prior performances. The potential for confirming the negative stereotype about their identity was enough to diminish their performance. It soon became the lab's goal to determine the cause for these achievement gaps and learn more of how social identities play a role in everyday performances (Steele, 2010). As more researchers learned about Steele's work in stereotype threat, more identity groups were explored, and the original theory expanded to be acknowledged around the world. Later in his career, the conclusion was gathered that there was not one or two specific groups that could be affected by the phenomenon of stereotype threat. His lab continued to explore the aspect of the situational pressure that seemed to increase the susceptibility for the stereotype to effect performance.

As educators continue to work towards equitable education for all students, it is important to note that there are many factors at play within stereotype threat that ultimately impact academic insecurity. A graduate student working under Steele, Joseph Brown, and an undergraduate student, Mikel Jollet, continued the stereotype threat literature and looked more specifically at how feelings about school and academics impacted the phenomenon (Steele, 2010). They discovered that the Black students who did not feel insecure about their academic performances were not impacted by the stereotype threat of their group and

hypothesized that this was due to these students lacking the skills and motivation to do well enough to show underperformances (Steele, 2010). Since the stereotype of being bad at school did not resonate with the students who were not engaged with school, it was not the missing piece towards building a positive educational experience with those specific students. A similar study more recently looked at the same possibility of stereotype threat for 198 Black students attending an urban elementary school after participating in diagnostic testing (Wasserberg, 2014). According to the findings, giving a reading test to Black students who were aware of racial stereotypes was detrimental to their performance, but not to those who were not. The stereotype threat phenomenon was only seen with the group of students made aware of the stereotypes against their identity prior to the reading test. Furthermore, participants who were provided with the opportunity to identify themselves with a negative stereotype prior to testing resulted in decreased self-efficacy and increased anxiety, emphasizing the interconnectedness of this sub-topic with a previous. Similarly, students with learning disabilities often showed an underperformance on academics, as well as learning new skills, possibly because of the stereotype threat they feel within most academic settings (May & Stone, 2014). Due to the number of factors surrounding the stereotype threat phenomenon, there is not a quick and easy answer to how to avoid these underperformances within our current education system.

In regard to specific stereotypes for varying disability labels, McIlroy and Storbeck (2011) conducted an ethnographic study aiming to gain a deeper insight into deaf identities. They shared the experiences of nine deaf participants and their identity narratives. One of the researchers within the study was also a participant, adding an auto-ethnographic component. The participants, all from South Africa, were deaf adults who either attended regular

mainstream schools or schools for the deaf. Six were female, three were male, two were Black, seven were White, and the average age of participants was 33. Through filmed interview sessions, participants shared detailed personal information including a self-description identity as a deaf person, family background, and if sign language was used as in home first or second language at home. Three thematic categories of being deaf, school impact, and deaf identity. Participants tended, at an early age, not to be conscious of themselves as *a deaf person,* until beginning school with non-deaf peers. Identity transitions were not simple or quick. There are stereotypes associated with being deaf in a mainstream setting that cannot be ignored. Loneliness in school persisted and impacted their identity formation due to inability to connect with peers. However, when three of the participants moved to a school for the Deaf, they experienced a profound change in identity. It is important to consider the timing of a disability label for a student and the impact that transition to receiving special education services and having a label may have had on their identity formation. In more recent years, additional research has shown stereotype threat can have a significant impact on the performance of students with disabilities, specifically within evaluative contexts (Desombre et al., 2018). This threat is further exacerbated when coupled with other factors such as social dominance orientation, contact with individuals with disabilities, and intergroup anxiety (Crowson & Brandes, 2014). Regardless, without a strong self-concept of who they are with their disability, students' ability to combat the stereotype threat experienced within academic settings may not be present.

Imposter Syndrome

As mentioned in Chapter 1, throughout the history of special education in the United States, there have been systemic power imbalances within the history of special education

that consequently limit students' opportunities. Through educational laws in the United States, such as FAPE and IDEA, students are required to receive a public education with special education support, either in an excluded or included classroom setting (McGovern, 2015). Disability is considered when determining the placement for a student's education, however according to Artiles (2013), there is a lack of research addressing the intersectionality of race and disability while considering a student's education. As discussed above, multiple identity markers influence how an individual interacts with their environment. If a student with a disability shares another marginalized identity marker, the influence their educational placement has on their education could be exponential.

Inclusive education within research is an ideology that promotes and respects the rights of all learners to participate in quality education, with an emphasis on the participation and valuing of all students (Allan, 2014; Booth, 2009). Placement in a mainstream classroom allows students to simply have opportunities for academic and social achievement. Within this proposed study, participants will have participated in advance placement courses, which occur within a mainstream setting. The benefits of inclusion seen within the current research raises the question as to why students with disabilities are not finding success within academically rigorous programs.

Before proceeding to more research surrounding this psychological threat, it is vital to define the term in the literature. Imposter syndrome, or the imposter phenomenon provides students with feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, and fear within educational settings (Grayson & Mateo, 2019). Imposter syndrome is often associated with high-achieving individuals who do not believe their accomplishments are deserved despite their objective successes and internalize a fear of being exposed as fraud (Bravata et al., 2020; Gottlieb et al., 2020; Zaed

et al., 2022). However, I would like to explore the psychological threat students with disabilities experience in relation to imposter syndrome. I believe that this phenomenon could have detrimental effects on students with disabilities as they grapple with the messages of not being smart enough or belonging in certain classes. Students are taught to doubt if they belong in certain classes based on their abilities and often transfer these feelings to their future career fields (Neureiter & Traut-Mattasuch, 2016). To combat the imposter phenomenon, one strategy is to lean on social support, such as teachers, family, and friends (Gardner et al., 2019). However, this introduces power dynamics that may be at play in influencing a student's ability to find success within academically rigorous courses.

When searching the literature, results from the search terms "imposter syndrome" and "students with disabilities" focused on the experiences of college-aged students and were dissertations instead of peer-reviewed empirical studies. This indicates a gap in the research on imposter syndrome in high school students with disabilities. However, other populations of students have been studied and may suggest prevalent and significant implications. To assess the prevalence of imposter syndrome among medical students in Pakistan, 188 participants were randomly selected and completed the Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale questionnaire (Maqsood et al., 2018). The study found high levels of imposter syndrome, specifically in medical students in year two and three. Students who have successfully progressed to year four of medical school did not present the same levels of imposter syndrome. Findings also suggested that students suffering from imposter syndrome had a Type A personality. Consistent with these findings, Wang et al. (2016) identified a link between perfectionism and psychological distress through the analysis of questionnaires in Russian college students, correlating this link to the effects of imposter syndrome.

Connecting this idea of imposter syndrome to marginalized college students, Holden et al. recruited college students from a southeastern university to complete surveys and questionnaires addressing the relationship between this phenomenon and stress between first-generation college students and continuing-generation college students. Findings suggested that both groups experienced similar levels of imposter syndrome and a strong correlation with levels of imposter syndrome and stress. However, Le (2019) highlighted the negative impact of imposter syndrome for first-generation college students when coupled with additional marginalized identities, such as race. These findings suggest that high school students with disabilities, who may already face challenges in academic and social settings due to other identity markers, could be more vulnerable to imposter syndrome.

Summary

This section has demonstrated that the exploration of identity within educational research is deeply rooted in psychological identity development theories. For students in special education, perceiving their disability as an integral aspect of their identity underscores the significance of comprehending how identity influences their day-to-day interactions. This discussion was historically grounded within various theories and psychological phenomena, emphasizing their relevance to high school-age students. Considering this literature review topic with the previous two, the pieces that have created *Mount Spededmic* have been examined. The systemic power structures that directly act against students with disabilities have laid the groundwork for teachers to obtain stigmatized beliefs and stereotypes towards this population. Students' identity development is held in turmoil without supportive teachers actively acting against those stigmatized beliefs to guide them through the potential psychological threats. Thus, school leaders have work to do in

ensuring equitable and just educational experiences for students with disabilities, which will be further analyzed and addressed within the final topic of this literature review.

Supporting the Climb of Mount Spededemic

As the scene was set above, there are large boulders impeding students' ability to even begin the trek to the top of Mount Spededmic. There were trees lining the path creating a picturesque scenery, yet also blocking the path to the top once again. Upon nearing the top of the mountain, the fog is so thick, it takes effort to attempt to see through. These natural roadblocks were compared to existing barriers in students with disabilities' journey to use their voices within the existing education system. The question then arises of how a young child can fathom the task of beginning to climb Mount Spededemic. They cannot do it alone. Even the most experienced hikers can benefit from a trail guide. Someone to begin exploding or moving the boulders, uprooting and trimming back the trees, and to provide extra light when the fog is too dense to see through independently. Within this metaphor, trail guides are symbolic of school leaders. This final section will underscore the role school leaders play in the educational experiences of students with disabilities and provide suggestions as to how they can act as trail guides along students' hike of Mount Spededemic.

As a former special educator, I have personally seen students struggle to find success within the general education curriculum. However, with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) students in special education should be given the appropriate modifications and accommodations to access the same curriculum as their general education peers (Haug, 2016; Huefner, 2000). Still, they struggled to find the same success as their peers. Students with learning disabilities (LD) and other high-functioning disabilities often showed an underperformance on academic tasks, as well as learning new skills, and as evidenced above,

possibly because of the stereotype threat they feel within most academic settings (May & Stone, 2014). Students with disabilities are often told that they are not or will not be successful in academics. When students are repeatedly told that they will be unsuccessful, it becomes internalized and leads to the stereotype threat phenomenon and a self-fulfilling prophecy. As school administrators are analyzing data and determining best courses of action to improve academic performance within their schools, methods to support the performance of students with disabilities needs to be at the forefront.

School leadership is needed at the building level to ensure the proper supports are in place for all students to gain access to academic programs and ultimately find success. As mentioned previously, due to the COVID 19 pandemic, academic achievement has become, and still is, a major priority for school leaders (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). As made evident through discussing the special education legislature, all students have the right to a free public education, and it is the duty of all school leaders and teachers to prepare students for limitless possibilities, therefore it is pertinent to engage students in rigorous content and do everything in our power to allow them to find success in that content. School leaders' role in academic achievement is multifaceted. They lead instructional initiatives, build the culture of the learning environment, and recruit and hire classroom teachers, all of which are connected to the academic achievement of their students. Many leadership styles are necessary within a school leader to complete those tasks. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the purpose of this qualitative study was to provide a space for students with disabilities to have a voice about their role in their academic experiences. Due to the prominent role of school leaders in the infrastructure of schools, their involvement will not be absent from these conversations.

A review of the literature was conducted utilizing the internet databases of EBSCO and Google Scholar, as well as relevant books and reports to determine the relevant literature for this topic. Original search terms included: “leadership”, “student achievement”, and “academic achievement”. The aforementioned terms led to over 600,000 results. This number was cut in half with the advanced settings only including results within the past 10 years. Within these results, the most prevalent works consisted of transformational leadership, instructional leadership, and student-centered leadership themes. The works included in this review incorporate both qualitative and quantitative studies, as well as meta-analyses and journal articles defining relevant educational theories. When the search term of “special education” was included in the narrowed search, the result list drastically decreased, which has been noted as a gap in the literature.

Most school leaders believe it is their role to improve student academic achievement through their leadership (Khalifa, 2018). School leaders are often focused on initiatives that can be put in place to improve state assessments and school attendance. Within the literature, various types of leadership are seen to be discussed in relation to academic achievement. However, many empirical studies indicate that school leaders are not directly correlated to student academic achievement (Allen et al., 2015; Bendikson et al., 2012; Shen et al., 2020; Witziers et al., 2003). This raises the question of the impact school leaders have on improving academic achievement within their buildings.

Much of the review of the relevant literature has found that students need academic motivation to increase the levels of academic achievement and in turn lower high school dropout rates (Singh, 2011). Additionally, academic motivation has been seen as crucial to academic achievement at any age. School leaders often have high school dropout rates at the

forefront of their minds and constantly seek methods to decrease them. Several studies discussed below detail the correlation between specific types of school leaders and academic achievement. As Warren Bennis (2000) believes, leadership is not innate. Leadership skills can be taught and trained to improve. Therefore, the question then arises of what kind of leadership skills are needed to develop in order to influence academic achievement.

To set the stage of the role of trail guides, implications of overall school leadership will first be explored. Then the conversation will be related back to the metaphor of Mount Spededmic that has grounded this literature review and the discussion will be organized in a similar manner. Beginning with the boulders at the base of the mountain formed through systemic barriers, the claim will be made that a transformational leader is necessary to reshape the school culture and guide breaking down those boulders to expose the path to the top. Next, evidence will be provided for the need of an instructional leader in order to work alongside teachers' crafts to determine what is best for students with disabilities in a classroom and begin uprooting those trees that are blocking the path. Finally, through what will be referred to as student-centered leadership, the case will be made for ethical and servant leadership to work hand in hand to prioritize the needs of students and allow them to find value in themselves and their identity to aid in seeing through the fog at the top of the mountain. Each type of leadership will be given a historical context to ensure a deep understanding of the importance of these styles within academic achievement for students with disabilities. After discussing the suggestions within these styles to climb Mount Spededmic, the shortcomings of this topic within the literature will be addressed, as well as implications for future research.

Implications of Overall School Leadership

The school leader, typically the school principal, is often the face of the school. They are in charge of building/maintaining the school culture, creating and implementing plans to hire effective teachers, supporting teacher development, and driving school improvement plans (Bartanen et al., 2019). The roles a school leader fills impact students on multiple levels. As seen in many studies, student test scores drop in the subsequent years after a principal transition indicating an undeniable impact of their leadership on academic achievement. Additionally, the literature notes that teacher perceptions of principal leadership indirectly impact academic achievement (Khalifa, 2018). This is important because it brings awareness to the idea that teachers also play a role in school leadership, as well, indicating the opportunity for teacher leaders to play the role of a trail guide for students with disabilities. It appears that there is evidence for a correlation between academic achievement and school leadership on all levels.

While this study will focus heavily on the United States, it is important to note the literature relevant to education in all countries to ensure the implications of this study are generalizable. In 2010, Jacobson analyzed the International Successful School Principalship Project to determine the effects of leadership on sustained student achievement. The cases in this longitudinal study came from 7 different nations (Australia, China, England, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and USA) and provided data on the role the principal played in students' success. The study found that the core leadership practices were utilized differently across nations due to policies and traditions, with all indicating that leadership impacting student achievement is an ongoing and dynamic process. In addition to the core leadership practices, a necessary prerequisite to academic achievement is improving the learning environment.

This study also brings into discussion the idea that the core leadership practices that lead to higher academic achievement may differ from state to state as there are also varying educational policies across the United States.

Within the literature, several meta-analyses provided generalizations of school leadership on academic achievement. A common trend found within the meta-analyses around this topic was a correlation between the two variables, but not a strong relationship. Witziers et al. (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of 37 studies to contribute to the existing debate of the importance of school leadership on student achievement. The quantitative studies analyzed utilized the direct effect models between the years of 1986 and 1996. The researchers used the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) instrument to categorize the principal behaviors. The meta-analysis found that school leadership has a small positive effect on student achievement with an emphasis on defining and communicating the school mission being the most relevant leadership behavior. However, studies utilizing only one instrument to measure the effects of leadership did not see the same correlation. Overall, the studies in this meta-analysis indicated that the connection between school leadership and academic achievement is small, if at all present.

Since the school principal is often seen as the face of the school, a closer look at general principal leadership may result in relevant implications. A study involving principals' leadership style's impact on academic achievement was conducted by Valentine and Prater (2011) in 313 Missouri public high schools. Survey and questionnaire data was utilized to measure academic achievement (standardized state tests) and principal leadership style (The Audit of Principal Effectiveness and the Principal Leadership Questionnaire). The results indicated that academic achievement is higher in schools where principals have more

competence, i.e., more education. This finding could be a result of school leaders having the knowledge of how to be trail guides for students acquired from their education. However, the results do not indicate a cause-and-effect relationship as there are several variables at play, i.e., principal characteristics and school demographics. More studies specifically researching the amount of principals' education and academic achievement would be needed to strengthen the correlation.

As discussed above, school leadership can encompass more than just the leadership of the principal. As students interact with their teachers daily, general teacher leadership may have an impact on academic achievement as well and can serve as a helping hand to embark on the climb of Mount Spededemic. Another meta-analysis conducted by Shen et al. (2020) analyzed the relationship between specifically teacher leadership and academic achievement. A total of 21 studies from 1997 – 2018 were included in the analysis if they met the following criteria: (a) examined the relationship between teacher leadership and achievement, (b) did not include principal leadership, and (c) had adequate data to calculate effect sizes. The results of the statistical analysis indicated a small, but significant, positive relationship, with stronger correlation within math and reading achievement. Overall, the teacher leadership behaviors with the greatest impact on students' achievement were facilitating instruction and curriculum improvements. The findings of the studies discussed within this section indicate that school leadership does not have a significant impact on academic achievement, therefore there must be a missing piece to this puzzle. A narrower look at specific styles of school leadership may indicate otherwise.

Transformational Leadership

A transformational leader is one who encourages and guides teachers to an increased level of morale and motivation (Burns, 1978). These kinds of school leaders redefine the perceptions and values of teachers as they try to change the organization from within, imploding the boulders that create resistance within a school building. According to Bass (1985), transformational leaders are often idealized within schools as morale leaders that work towards building culture. Coupled with the work of Sergiovanni (2007), transformational leaders act as stewards of the values and vision of the school through a layer of moral actions in every decision. Within the context of this study, a transformational leader would be one who is reframing systems that are ingrained in the school's culture and actively working against students with disabilities in a moral and just manner. This could look like providing motivation and inspiration for teachers to do more than what is expected (Bass, 1985). Measurement of a successful transformational leader is often in terms of the influence they have on their staff. This style of leadership has been popular within schools since the 1990s as the works of Kenneth Leithwood, Doris Jantzi, and colleagues demonstrated more effective school leadership with these behaviors (Boberg & Bourgeois, 2016).

Through a transformational leadership lens, Ross and Gray (2006) evaluated the impact of teacher perceptions of school leaders on student achievement. The data was derived from a previously reported data set consisting of the elementary teachers from two school districts in Ontario. The study revealed the principals who adopted transformational leadership styles had higher teacher efficacy which in turn positively impacted student achievement. The results indicated that the principal's impact on student achievement was correlated to how teachers view their capacity as leaders. Specifically, principals with a

transformational leadership style had high teacher efficacy and commitment, which in turn increased student achievement. Several studies discussed previously highlighted the similar importance of teacher perceptions of the school principal on academic achievement. Teachers are more likely to uproot their views of students with disabilities if they trust the trail guide is leading the building effectively.

As will be noted as a trend across each of the leadership styles dissected, transformational leadership does not always have a direct correlation with academic achievement. In a purposeful sample of elementary school principals in suburban, southeast Texas, Allen et al. (2015) survey data targeting transformational leadership, school climate, and academic achievement was collected and analyzed to determine the relationship. A positive relationship was found between transformational leadership and school climate, while no relationship was found between either variable and academic achievement. This implies that there must be another variable at play that impacts academic achievement. It should be recalled that the idea of leadership within a school is an ongoing and dynamic process (Jacobson, 2010). Moving towards a more direct leadership approach with teachers, instructional leaders will be analyzed to explore the ability for school leaders to uproot the trees along the path to the top of Mount Spededemic.

Instructional Leadership

To reiterate, the school principal is the head of the school and has the final say in building decisions. This is especially true within instructional leadership. During its development within the Effective Schools movement in the 1980s, the idea of instructional leadership places the principal as the main source of instructional expertise (Marks & Printy, 2003). In general terms, instructional leadership is a type of leadership that focuses on

teaching and learning. The principal's role within this style revolves around supervising classroom curriculum and instruction and utilizing data to monitor academic achievement (Barth, 1986). However, as schools have continued to grow and develop, instructional leadership has become more of a shared leadership model where principals turn to teachers to gain insights and ideas (Marks & Printy, 2003). Therefore, it is again evident that principals and teachers both play an integral role in an effective method of instructional leadership and can both act as trail guides for students with disabilities.

As a result of instructional leaders ensuring quality instruction is a top school priority, many studies indicate increased student achievement (Jenkins, 2009). For example, Andrews and Soder (1987) in a seminal study examined the relationship between key leadership characteristics and academic achievement using an 18-measure questionnaire aimed to identify interactions between principals and teachers within a Seattle School District. The district comprised 67 elementary schools and 20 secondary schools. The California Achievement Test was utilized to measure academic performance for students utilizing 1982 as the baseline of achievement to 1984. Students had to be enrolled for the entire 1983 to 1984 school year to be considered. Results indicated a significant relationship, beyond normal equivalent gain scores, in academic achievement. This relationship was seen within both reading and math for students in schools with strong leaders and schools with teachers that perceive the school leader as an instructional leader. Findings also indicated particularly significant differences when considering ethnicity and income indicating that a strong leader is needed to ensure success for those demographics. Teacher perceptions of the principal (as an instructional leader) are seen as critical to academic achievement in reading and math.

As an instructional leader, the school principal(s) work alongside the building teachers to support and guide the curriculum and teaching strategies (Brolund, 2016). The idea of promoting student learning is at the forefront of every decision (Carraway & Young, 2015; duPlessis, 2013, as cited in Brolund, 2016). Instructional leaders are often seen communicating clear school visions and goals for all stakeholders, as well as mentoring and coaching teachers through professional development. Within this process could be where the uprooting of key beliefs teachers are holding onto occurs. Gaziel (2007) investigated the relationship between instructional leadership and student achievement utilizing thirty-two randomly chosen secondary schools in Israel with 256 total teachers rated their principal's instructional leadership behaviors. The Instructional Leadership Behavior instrument was utilized to gather data on the teachers' perceptions of the principal's behaviors. The study indicated that the instructional leadership behaviors significantly correlated to student achievement are framing school goals and communicating them to the staff. These findings are similar to the meta-analysis discussed above that indicated a stronger correlation of leadership and academic achievement when defining and communicating the school mission (Witziers et al., 2003). Findings also indicated that principals only invest some of their time developing strong instructional leadership behaviors. The lack of time spent on developing these behaviors would be pertinent if instructional leadership is found to have a large impact on academic achievement.

However, within the literature there are mixed implications regarding the impact instructional leadership has directly on academic achievement. Rodrigues and Ávila de Lima (2021) conducted semi-structured interviews that incorporated the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) with 13 principals and 10 Pedagogical Council (PC)

presidents in Portugal to rate the relationship between instructional leadership and student achievement. The PIMRS included five items to measure the 10 leadership functions, as well as 50 items to measure the behaviors and practices as instructional leaders. A majority of the principals were males between the ages of 41 and 60. Over half of the principals had 4 years or less of experience, while few had more than 10 years of experience. This is important to note due to the study above mentioning higher academic achievement in schools with principals perceived as more competent (Valentine & Prater, 2011). The principals in this study did not have a lot of experience comparatively. The study's findings indicated that the school leaders viewed instructional leadership practices as important for student achievement but not significantly responsible for the outcomes. This implies that principals may be reporting instructional leadership practices but not believing in the importance of the practices. In addition, findings suggested that principals may not even develop certain instructional leadership practices because they are busy with other facets of their job and already do not see the causation between their leadership practices and student achievement.

To continue the idea of studies indicating an unsubstantial connection between instructional leadership and student achievement, Shatzer et al. (2014) compared the effects of instructional and transformational leadership on student achievement. Elementary schools in the Intermountain West of the United States included 509 teachers who answered questionnaires to rate the principal's leadership style, as well as the Principal Instructional Management Rating scale. Student achievement was measured through a criterion referenced test. Results indicated the principal's leadership styles have a meaningful impact on student achievement with instructional leadership having more of an impact than transformational

leadership. Again, these findings suggest that instructional leadership plays a role in student achievement but does not address to what extent.

Both leadership styles have indicated inconclusive correlations between school leaders and academic achievement. These two styles have also been indicative of adult-centered approaches to school leadership with findings directly connecting to the influence on teacher behaviors. A switch in focus is needed before ruling out the idea of a trail guide being necessary to this framework. The continued search for the missing piece to this puzzle, leads to a more student-centered approach as it is indicative that students are doing a majority of the heavy lifting in climbing this mountain with the lack of influence of leadership thus far in this discussion.

Student-centered Leadership

As students near the top of Mount Spededemic, the focus becomes grappling with the formation of their identity which is an individualized process. Therefore, the methods of leadership to guide this process need to be more student-centered. There are two methods of leadership that I have combined under the student-centered umbrella: ethical leadership and servant leadership. Ethical leadership focuses on the moral development and well-being of followers, emphasizing integrity, fairness, and concern for the broader society (Reddy & Kamesh, 2016).This aligns with a human-centered approach that prioritizes the needs and growth of people. Servant leadership takes this a step further by explicitly placing the needs of followers at the center, with the leader acting as a steward and facilitator of their development. Characteristics like empowerment, humility, and interpersonal acceptance demonstrate a deep commitment to serving the people within the organization. By integrating the moral foundation of ethical leadership with the serving attitude of servant leadership,

these leadership styles create a holistic, human-centric approach that considers both the ethical conduct of the leader and the well-being and growth of followers. These two types of leadership exemplify the core tenets of student-centered leadership and will be discussed at length following. When searching the literature, again, there were very few results connecting the terms “ethical leadership” or “servant leadership” with “academic achievement” and “special education,” which highlights a gap in the current research.

The Center for Ethical Leadership states that “[e]thical leadership is about knowing your core values and having the courage to live them in all parts of your life in service of the common good” (Grace & Grace, 1998). Across the literature, the claim is made for leaders with ethical values to be important for the functioning of organizations as leaders without ethics can result in a lack of integrity and be harmful for stakeholders (Ahmad et al., 2017; Ciulla, 1998). Every positive leadership style has undertones of ethics and integrity (Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Den Hartog, 2015), but the focus of the individual student, as needed when focusing on students with disabilities, is even more apparent when narrowing in on ethical leadership as its own style of leadership (Brown et al., 2005). While a majority of the literature revolved around businesses outside of education or higher education, many agree on the definition of an ethical leader as someone with the characteristics of both a “moral person” and “moral manager,” including honesty, integrity, openness, truthfulness, and a concern for others (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Treviño et al., 2000). The studies reviewed below highlight the importance of these characteristics within moving an organization forward and connections are translated into how this would look working with students with disabilities.

While there is a lack of studies explicitly exploring ethical leadership and academic achievement, the search of the literature indicated that ethical leadership plays a pivotal role in fostering a positive school climate, which in turn influences teacher commitment and ultimately student achievement (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Hendri, 2019; Ko et al., 2018; Sabir & Bhutta, 2018; Thien et al., 2014). To explore this relationship specifically, Sabir (2020) employed a quantitative approach through collected data from 320 teachers in Pakistan through an anonymous questionnaire designed to measure ethical leadership perceptions and teacher commitment. The data analysis included descriptive statistics to characterize the sample, while correlation analysis helped determine the strength of the association between study variables. To ensure the reliability of measurement instruments, Cronbach's alpha was calculated. Results indicated a moderately strong correlation between ethical leadership and teacher commitment. Through the discussion of the results, the claim is made that “ethical leadership behaviors can contribute to positive employee outcomes like commitment of teachers which can lead to achievement of school and educational goals” (p. 48).

Connecting back to the importance of a shared vision as discussed within the lens of instructional leadership, ethical leaders are also seen articulating a clear and inspiring vision for the school that aligns with teachers' values (Ciulla, 1998). This shared sense of purpose increases teachers' commitment to the organization. Toytok and Kapusuzoglu (2015) aimed to understand the influence of ethical leaders’ behaviors on the overall school climate as perceived by teachers. Similar scales to the study discussed preceding were utilized to survey 3302 teachers in Duzce, Turkey during the 2013-14 school year. Regression analysis was performed to determine the predictability of ethical leadership on overall school culture.

Findings suggested a fairly high level of correlation between the two variables indicating that the more ethical of a school leader, the more positive teachers will view the school culture and in turn plays a role in their desire to perform well in their job of educating students. This study, while not directly related to student achievement, indicates the power of a school leader in providing environments where students with disabilities can thrive.

Even though the studies within this area are few in number due to the curiosity in this area being recent, similar findings were not unique to countries outside of the United States. A quantitative study conducted in a metropolitan area of the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States examined the overall leadership abilities of school leaders, as perceived by teachers (Webster & Litchka, 2020). The authors note the importance of ethical leadership for schools in the United States with far greater percentages of students from marginalized groups. The participants of this study consisted of 258 teachers who were also enrolled in a graduate program for educational leadership. All participants completed a 30 item Likert rating scale to gather demographic data, leadership practices, and perceived leader integrity. Findings suggested a very strong and positive correlation between the leadership of school principals and their ethical behaviors, which is consistent across the literature. In contrast to other studies, this study found that there were outside factors, such as teacher ethnicity, location of school, and the ethnicity of the principal, that played a role in the type of leadership the principal provided. In relation to the current study, this specific finding is pertinent due to the socio-cultural dynamics at play for students with disabilities. The assumption can be made that school principals may adjust their leadership style when working with varying populations of students based on their perceived needs, which could be

seen as a benefit to having a more specialized trail guide on the student's climbing of Mount Spededemic.

In essence, ethical leadership can be seen as a catalyst for teacher commitment through the studies outlined above, which is an essential component of a high-performing school and in turn academic achievement for students with disabilities, but again does not connect directly to academic achievement. As alluded to in the introduction of this topic, a school leader may work within multiple frameworks of leadership. Under this student-centered umbrella lives not only ethical leadership, but also servant leadership. While a majority of the reviewed literature on ethical leadership addressed students second-hand through teacher commitments, servant leadership truly focuses on the student within all decisions. A stark contrast between this student-centered leadership approach and the transformational and instructional styles discussed previously, the studies discussed following, specifically addressing servant leadership, indicated a positive correlation with academic achievement.

According to Greenleaf (1970) the servant-leader is one who is a servant first, meaning their natural feeling is to serve others, and the desire to lead comes from that sentiment. The key characteristics of a servant-leader are that they ensure the needs of those they serve are being met. Greenleaf also suggests that this servant leadership approach can be seen in schools. He argues that schools and other institutions should focus on "building a group of people who, under the influence of the institution, grow taller and become healthier, stronger, more autonomous" (p. 22), rather than just using people to achieve their goals. A servant leader is constantly seeking opportunities to aid their followers in individual growth (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Through a social learning lens, it can be seen that followers of

ethical leaders model their behaviors leading to more appropriate behaviors because of the trustworthiness built ahead of time (Bandura, 1986; Reddy & Kamesh, 2016). van Dierendonck (2011) notes that the practice of servant leadership will increase the opportunities for self-discovery through their mindset centered around growth and always seeking opportunities to serve followers in achieving their aspirations. This is the exact kind of leadership students with disabilities need at the top of the mountain as they are grappling with their identity and psychological threats that coincide with their disability-identity.

For example, a quantitative non-experimental design study explored the relationship between teachers possessing servant leadership skills and the academic achievement of students in 15 public schools in Houston, TX (Gultekin & Dougherty, 2021). Teachers' servant leadership characteristics were determined through the Organizational Leadership Assessment instrument, while academic achievement was gleaned from state standardized test reporting. While correlation was seen through many areas of the leadership assessment and student achievement, it was only the servant leadership values that indicated a strong positive correlation with academic achievement. This creates the need for school leaders to include developing servant leadership characteristics within teacher professional development plans to positively influence academic achievement in their building.

Prior to the findings in Texas, a similar study explored the relationship, once again, among teachers' servant leadership styles and students' academic achievement, closed-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 101 teachers and 169 students in the Ethiopian Higher Education System (Gedifew & Bitew, 2017). Rather than standardized test scores, analysis of students' GPAs was utilized. Similar findings were reported that teachers' servant leadership attributes led to a positive influence on student

engagement and ultimately student achievement. Findings suggested once again to provide teachers with the support to sharpen their servant leadership skills. Even more recently, but within the same vein of this method of leadership creating positive environments, Kilag et al. (2023) explored the role of servant leadership in specifically creating a positive school climate through a quantitative research design. Aspects of a positive school climate included student academic achievement, teacher job satisfaction, and school culture. Data was collected through survey questionnaires from 40 teachers and 1000 students in an unnamed school district in the Philippines. Through descriptive and inferential statistics analysis, results indicated that servant leadership played a significant role in creating a positive school climate and, more importantly for the study at hand, student academic achievement.

Summary

In summary, the current literature is mixed on the impact leadership has on academic achievement. The studies reviewed above are split down the middle with only half of the studies indicating a significant, but small correlation between the two variables. In addition, the current literature is lacking in research on the impact of leadership on academic achievement directly. A majority of the leadership styles gleaned similarly towards teacher perceptions as the avenue to hold the most influence in this area. This leads to the assumption that the trail guide for students may in fact be teacher leaders within the building as they are who students interact most directly with on a regular basis. This brings into question how teachers develop the ability to uproot their own views, if needed. As outlined above, school leaders are the ones that frame the mission and goals of the school, as well as have final say on the instruction and curriculum of the school. The conclusion can be drawn that it is up to the school leader to reinforce the role of a trail guide on to the teachers through their

leadership to ensure students with disabilities make it to the top of the mountain. However, with this connection still not evident through the current research, the missing pieces to this puzzle of how students with disabilities remain unclear. Future research needs to include a more in-depth look at successful school leaders, in terms of academic achievement, and what has allowed them to find that success and what additional tools are being provided for their students to climb successfully.

Conclusion

This review of the literature has explored the complex web of barriers that students with disabilities face in utilizing their voices to advocate for their educational needs. Through the metaphor of Mount Spededmic, I have identified systemic power structures, staff stigmas and stereotypes, and students' identity development challenges as the key obstacles preventing students from reaching the top Mount Spedemic and ultimately academic achievement. The role of school leadership support in the climb of Mount Spedemic was addressed as a possible solution to the treacherous nature of the hike.

The existing literature on these topics revealed a concerning lack of student voice within the special education process, particularly regarding the identification process and the development of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). However, these challenges also presented opportunities for intervention. By dismantling the mythconceptions surrounding special education and fostering a collaborative environment that empowers students to participate in their educational decisions, we can begin to level the playing field for students with disabilities. The following chapter will outline the methodology employed in this study. This methodology will detail the research design, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques that will be used to gather the voices of students with disabilities and explore how

educators can better support their climb up Mount Spededmic. By understanding the lived experiences of these students, we can develop strategies to create a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape for all.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

As discussed in Chapter 1, systemic power imbalances silence students in special education, limiting their opportunities for self-advocacy. This is a persistent concern, as parents typically serve as the primary decision-makers until their children reach adulthood (Koca et al., 2023; Rebore & Zirkel, 2000; Yell et al., 2017). Studies have shown that a lack of parental involvement in the IEP process can hinder students' ability to express their opinions during key transition activities, particularly at the high school level (Liu et al., 2018). This, in turn, can restrict their post-secondary options. Additionally, conflicting expectations between parents and teachers regarding students' abilities can create power imbalances within IEP meetings (Lalvani, 2015). The scarcity of student voice in both the IEP process and transition activities can lead to insufficient student choice and, consequently, limited post-secondary outcomes.

Through analyzing the commonalities in their stories and determining patterns, this narrative study explored the role of student voice in the special education process for students with learning disabilities. I sought to provide a space for this population to voice their experiences through listening to the stories they share about the phenomenon. Through the narrative inquiry tradition, the stories collected related to using their voice to increase their choices lead to dissolving existing power imbalances as barriers to their success. These stories were analyzed through a sociocultural lens to ensure their applicability and transferability across contexts (Grbich, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). The unit of analysis, or according to Patton (2015), “the focus of the study” (p. 260), were the stories and perceptions of adults, ranging from age 18 to 35, who experienced the use of voice, or an absence of

voice when navigating academic success within special education in their K-12 careers. The following research questions focused the inquiry of the participants' experience in special education:

Central Question: What are the stories (secret, sacred, and cover) that students in special education narrate about using their voices in their educational experiences?

- How do students use their voices in educational decision-making conversations?
- What are students' most significant challenges in utilizing their voices in the IEP process?
- What do students have to say about the support they need to have a voice in their educational experiences?

The research question and sub-questions guided the exploration of student voice within special education with the intent of creating a space for these voices to be illuminated and discover the “secret,” “sacred,” and “cover” stories” stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996) of this population within the context of their involvement in the special education process, defined in Chapter 1. Throughout this process, it was essential to be aware of the possibility that more questions may arise. I was willing to explore the issues that the participants raised as this flexibility is a hallmark of qualitative research (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Further, this study mutually benefited post-secondary students and adults by providing a platform to share their experiences advocating for their education after turning 18, focusing on both successes and challenges associated with this responsibility (Cook-Sather, 2006; Demetriou & Wilson, 2010; Quinn & Owen, 2016). As students graduate high school and move on to post-secondary educational settings or careers, the role of student voice is illuminated through the need to self-advocate. Therefore, educators must understand students’ stories of success

experiences to support voices and challenges that inhibit advocacy for post-secondary plans (Ratts et al., 2007). At the end of the study, I uncovered the tools students with disabilities carry in their backpacks that have aided their ability to hike Mount Spededemic, described in Chapter 1, and applied these across multiple settings to positively influence their future opportunities.

This chapter aims to describe the rationale for selecting qualitative inquiry as a research paradigm, communicate the theoretical tradition of narrative inquiry as a design element, report on my role as the researcher, and depict data collection and analysis strategies to investigate the phenomenon. I begin with a discussion of the nature of qualitative inquiry and decisions made regarding the theoretical tradition that will give the methodological decisions for the study, along with rationales for the selection. Following this section are elements of design, including the setting, participant sampling methods, as well as data collection and analysis. To conclude, data management and limitations with validity, reliability, and ethical considerations will be discussed. These qualitative design choices address the complex problem of student voice in special education.

Rationale for Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is "research about persons' lives, stories, behavior, but also about organizational functioning, social movements, or interactional relationships" and is a dynamic process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 17). While complex, qualitative inquiry is more of a personal type of inquiry as the researcher directly conducts the inquiry and is deeply involved in the process (Patton, 2015). Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) defined *qualitative research* as a "situated activity that locates the observer in the world" consisting of "practices that make the world visible" (p. 3), indicating that qualitative research allows

the researcher to study things in their everyday settings and make sense of natural occurring phenomena. Further, qualitative researchers have personal reasons and connections that have drawn them toward a specific research topic. This personal connection guides their interpretation of the findings and meaning making based on personal experience, often extending simple descriptions into logical extensions and conclusions (Stake, 2010).

The areas of study or nature of the research problem can naturally lead a researcher to select qualitative methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As seen in Chapter 1 and throughout the literature discussed in Chapter 2, students' voices have been silenced in the IEP process throughout the history of special education in the United States, robbing them of opportunities within secondary experiences and beyond (Lalvani, 2015; Liu et al., 2018; Rebore & Zirkel, 2000). The nature of this research problem directly revolves around illuminating the voices of students who have experienced this silencing, highlighting the role barriers played in their post-secondary outcomes, and shedding light on their stories both of success and struggle. At the heart of this research, I wanted provide a space for individuals with learning disabilities to share their stories, therefore, a qualitative approach, specifically narrative inquiry, is the only method that makes sense.

As a researcher, I hold a personal interest in the potential results of my study, as all qualitative researchers should (Stake, 2010). I have a close tie to someone with a learning disability who faced many barriers within his secondary and post-secondary education: my brother. "A lot of what people do is motivated by the love for their families and a desire to help people" (Stake, 2010, p. 2). This sentiment drives me to make sense of a phenomenon I see daily as an educator by capturing stories and diverse perspectives and finding patterns for meaning making (Patton, 2015). Therefore, I hoped to allow the conversation to surround the

phenomenon my brother experienced through the stories of similar students collected through a narrative inquiry approach.

A primary characteristic that separates qualitative inquiry is making meaning through the collected data. Most people want to understand phenomena in the world around them (Patton, 2015). They seek to figure out the reasons behind personal actions and events in their lives. Similarly, qualitative inquiry may allow the researcher to help individuals learn how things work (or do not) by identifying themes and patterns within data that reflect their experiences. While this meaning is created, a qualitative researcher needs to consider the context of experiences. According to Patton (2015), context includes "important nuances of culture, politics, economy, history, geography, resources, and institutions" (p. 9). Phenomena may look and feel different in varying contexts; therefore, it cannot be ignored.

Qualitative inquiry is the most appropriate method to study the phenomenon of voices of special education students, as the goal is to create meaning through understanding the participants' lived experiences and the aligned context (Maxwell, 2013; Moriarty, 2011; Patton, 2015). Through a qualitative approach, the stories of the participants' experiences can be recorded and analyzed for meaning. This qualitative study aimed to share the stories of those who may not have been heard in the past because of the silencing of their voices. Through the sole lens of narratology or narrative inquiry, to be discussed in detail below, the participants' experiences were illuminated and dissected to develop applicable meaning.

Narrative Inquiry

As alluded to above, narrative inquiry, also called narratology, is a qualitative research method that focuses on understanding participants' stories through their perspectives. It treats these stories as data, examining them as embodiments of lived

experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Researchers collect various narratives from participants, including their experiences with formal education, daily life, and critical life events. Drawing heavily on John Dewey's philosophy of experience, Clandinin and Connelly developed the understanding that individuals' stories are always embedded in social contexts. They created this methodology to explore teachers' experiential knowledge and subsequently applied it to studying student experiences (Clandinin, 2023). Participants are viewed as whole individuals with interconnected experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The collected stories typically have a beginning, middle, and end, reflecting how participants make sense of the world (Clandinin, 2023; Patton, 2015). The central goal of narrative inquiry is to gain insights into diverse cultural and social contexts by interpreting these stories. Additionally, the method emphasizes not only individuals' experiences but also the broader social, cultural, and institutional narratives that shape, express, and enact those experiences (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Therefore, researchers need a strong theoretical framework, such as the one discussed in Chapter 1, regarding students with disabilities' hiking experiences, to ground their inquiry.

Clandinin (2023) expressed that the concept of "narrative" has become multifaceted within research. It can encompass various approaches, including utilizing stories as the primary data source, employing narrative to represent findings, analyzing content through a narrative lens, and structuring research around a narrative framework. Narrative inquiry comprises research puzzles rather than research questions within these techniques. These research puzzles are composed around a particular wonder, in this case, student voice in special education, with “a sense of a search, a ‘research,’ a searching again, …a sense of continual reformulation” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 124). Rather than a specific and

focused question to guide the research, a more open-ended inquiry that frames the research and emphasizes curiosity, evolving alongside the data analysis, allows the research puzzle to be at the center. For this research project, the sense of wonderment I hold regarding student voice has led to a desire to understand it better and will continue to shift and expand as I delve deeper into the data and encounter new insights with the research questions listed above as a guide to this process.

As the researcher, I viewed the participants' stories as whole and complete data themselves. This approach prioritizes highlighting the participants' voices and their unique experiences through the research process. The stories shared will not be fragmented or analyzed for isolated details. As the stories shared will be the participants' experiences and "defined interpersonally and intersubjectively by people interacting in a network of relationships," they will be realities around the specific phenomenon. They can be understood by more than just the researcher (Patton, 2015, p. 121). This method of data story collection is intensely tricky and time-consuming but allows for deeper, more complete learning (Clandinin, 2006).

Within this narrative inquiry lens, Clandinin and Connelly (2023) also stress the importance of coming into this research method with a personal, practical, and social justification. A personal justification revolves around the stories that I am living and telling, ultimately leading me to this research puzzle. My personal justification is grounded in the story of my brother, as well as the daily interactions I have had and continue to have with students across a wide array of disabilities and their post-secondary livelihoods. A practical justification entails attending to the importance of considering the possibility of changing practice. My practical justification acknowledges that there must be a layer of unknown that

has allowed some students with disabilities to make it to the top of Mount Spededemic and have used their voice to advocate for their needs that could be replicated for a change in outcomes for this population. Finally, a social justification includes justifying the research puzzle regarding new methodological and disciplinary knowledge. Within this context, this research project added to the body of research within this area of student voice in special education.

It is crucial to understand student voices in special education. Student narratives can illuminate classroom social dynamics, their interactions with teachers and peers, and how these interactions influence their experiences. Utilizing only the narrative inquiry theoretical tradition allowed the space for these students' voices to be shared and remain at the heart of this research puzzle. It will provide a comprehensive understanding of their voice and perspective within the educational environment. The role of the researcher is vital within narrative inquiry as the narrative creation process should be a seamless co-creation process (Clandinin, 2023). I describe my role as a researcher within the context of this tradition in the following section.

Role of the Researcher

In a postmodern world, the researcher has stepped away from the role of a neutral observer, instead adopting a more mediating or relational stance (Grbich, 2004). This shift allows the participants' narratives to take center stage, while the researcher acts as a facilitator, interpreting and connecting these stories. This decentering approach ensures that the participants' voices remain at the forefront, shaping the research narrative. However, it's important to acknowledge that every researcher brings their own unique perspectives, or frames, shaped by factors such as gender, culture, education, and personal experiences

(Goffman, 1974; MacLachlan & Reid, 1994). These frames inevitably influence how the researcher interprets and highlights participant voices. To mitigate the impact of these biases, the researcher can employ various strategies, such as using patterns, time, emic perspectives, and careful consideration of ideology, metaphors, irony, and silence (Bochner, 2001). By doing so, the researcher can strive to present a more balanced and authentic representation of the participants' experiences.

My role as a researcher shaped the frame through which I view the phenomenon and requires consideration, especially as a doctoral student researcher, my positionality must also be identified and articulated (Holmes, 2020). For instance, my background in special education may led me to focus on certain aspects of the phenomenon, while researchers from other backgrounds might gather different insights. My positionality as a researcher influenced how research is conducted, the outcomes, and results (Rowe, 2014). Therefore, it is important to note key characteristics that may influence the study. As a White female from the Midwest, I viewed the phenomenon differently than my colleagues of different races, genders, or locales. My positionality also includes the personal experiences that have shaped my current views and will be discussed at length following (Holmes, 2020). As a new researcher, I understand that developing a positionality statement takes time and deep reflection and I updated it as I uncovered more about my research topic and personal stance. It has become evident through the discussions in Chapters 1 and 2 that my experience working with students with disabilities has fostered a particular interest in the role of student voice within special education, the basis of this research puzzle.

This study was designed solely within a narratology lens, allowing for more researcher involvement through co-construction of the narrative with the participants

(Clandinin, 2023). Building an understanding of the phenomenon and identifying ways in which students can find post-secondary success is very important to me. Within my educational and personal journeys, I have heard too many times that a student cannot enroll for a course or that a rigorous course load for all would not be possible because some students cannot be successful in that particular setting. I believe hearing those phrases even once is too often. Therefore, I desired to gather data on the stories of students who have experienced hearing these phrases and other barriers throughout their high school experience and how they were able (or not able) to find success in a post-secondary world.

Qualitative inquiry allows more flexibility and creativity within the procedure to become more involved with the research (Patton, 2015). As a qualitative researcher, I actively engaged with my participants in all aspects of this study to allow for the narrative's natural co-construction. As a former special education teacher and now a program coordinator, I relied on my experience working with students who might struggle to use their voices to engage with the participants and share the empathy of their stories while remaining nonjudgmental and open throughout the process. To engage with my participants even further, I practiced ensuring that my personal senses are engaged throughout the process through practicing mindfulness and depending on research practices that monitored and guided the study (Patton, 2015).

A key component of the data analysis process was to ensure reflectivity and reflexivity as I monitored and adjusted throughout the process (Patton, 2015). Reflexivity refers to the researcher’s self-awareness of their influence and biases on the research process and findings and is a proactive process that minimizes biases and increases validity throughout the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015). The

narrative tradition, specifically, emphasizes the importance of the researcher's reflexivity and acknowledges their influence in shaping the research process. As such, the researcher's role within narrative inquiry is to collect data and actively engage in the co-creation of meaning with the participants. It involves critically examining one's assumptions, values, and experiences that may affect how data is collected, analyzed, and interpreted. To ensure reflexivity during my study, I engaged in reflexive journaling and memo writing to reduce the impact of my biases. These analytic memos allowed me to develop awareness and become cognizant of my thinking as I analyzed participant stories to make sense of the data (Miles et al., 2020; Patton, 2015).

Finally, reactivity within a research study can be described as "the response of the researcher and the research participants to each other during the research process" (Paterson, 1994, p. 301). Reactivity is unavoidable within the research process as participants are likely to change their behavior due to the researcher's presence. Therefore, building trust with the participants throughout the process is critical to eliminate the effects of reactivity as much as possible. To do so, I paid close attention to "the importance of deep introspection, political consciousness, cultural awareness, and ownership of one's [my] perspective" (Patton, 2015, p. 70). The analytic and self-reflective memos referenced above were a crucial layer to address this threat of reactivity within the study. Further elements relevant to the design of the study are discussed in the following section.

Design of the Study

This section provides a description of the setting, a rationale for selecting the setting, a description of the participants, and an outline of the selection of the participants. The data sources were utilized within this study are described and placed within a historical context of

qualitative research. It also provides contextual information about how the data sources were organized and analyzed. This section will discuss the procedural steps of the study that were utilized to address the research questions.

Setting and Demographic Data

When considering the proposed setting for this study, it was challenging to place parameters on the setting. The study did not focus on one specific school or entity but rather on students with special education experience. The students were able to come from any school if they had experience with the phenomenon. However, due to the geographical location of the researcher and the personal and professional connections that linked to gathering participants, the setting was, for the majority, within the Midwest. Not setting a constraint to the specific setting of the study allowed for a larger pool of participants. Specific demographic data is detailed within Chapter 4.

Participants

Participants were recruited through electronic means of communication, such as social media, email, text messages, and word of mouth. Again, due to the geographical location of the researcher, most of the participants resided within the Midwest. However, with the power of social media, there were not boundaries for sampling based on location if the participants met the selection criteria. All participants engaged with the study in a volunteer manner and met the following criteria prior to receiving an invitation to participate in part two of the study:

1. Be able to discuss and retell emotions experienced throughout schooling, specifically high school.
2. Have first-hand experience with the special education process.

3. Minimum age of 18 years.

Ultimately, eight participants who met the criteria were recruited for phase two of the study, which involved in-depth interviews and reflective journal prompts.

Sampling Procedures

This study was designed in two parts to obtain a sample of participants with experience within the special education process. First, a mixed-methods questionnaire was utilized as a data collection method and sampling technique through purposeful snowball sampling. The snowball sampling as a sampling measure within the questionnaire entailed a referral component for the participants, who were asked to provide contact information for individuals they knew who fit the selection criteria (Morse, 2010; Patton, 2015). This aided in ensuring a large pool of potential participants were available for the second part of the study and snowball the number of willing survey participants with each referral.

Second, the mixed-methods questionnaire was used as a screening survey to invite participants with rich experiences surrounding the phenomenon to participate in the second part of the study (in-depth interviews). It is vital that selected participants have "rich, detailed, and concrete" or thick descriptions of the phenomenon (Patton, 2015, p. 534). The desired participants had an IEP in high school, preferably before. As discussed above, the selection criteria for participants with descriptive needs of the emerging theory included: (a) being able to discuss and retell emotions experienced throughout schooling, specifically high school, (b) having first-hand experience with the special education process, and (c) minimum age of 18 years (Morse, 2010). To ensure variation among the participants selected for interviewing, I also relied on maximum variation sampling and picked a wide range of cases that still fit the criteria listed (Patton, 2015).

Data Sources

While immersing myself in the process, I collected three primary data sources to allow for a three-dimensional method to piece together participants' stories and naturally form the narrative of their use of voice in their special education experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The data for this study included the mixed methods screening survey, in-depth interviews, and reflective journal prompts. The data collection process focused on a cyclical process to ensure data saturation, aiming to collect enough data to the point at which new data no longer provide additional insights or information (Grbich, 2013). The following sections outline the data sources that was used and describes the order of collection within the study.

Surveys

In this study, the term *surveys* is used synonymously with *mixed-method questionnaire* and will be used as a sampling and data collection method, as stated in the previous section. "The survey is a systematic method for gathering information from (a sample of) entities for the purpose of constructing quantitative descriptors of the attributes of the larger population of which the entities are members" (Groves et al., 2004, p. 4). According to Jansen (2010), quantitative studies often utilize surveys to gain insight into the distribution of variables within populations. There are several advantages to surveys within qualitative methods. For example, participants may be more willing to share information through a survey as the researcher is not present for the completion and the time needed to conduct it (Safdar et al., 2016).

The mixed methods survey within this study consisted of both Likert scale items and open-ended questions to allow for both inductive and deductive analysis of the responses (see

Appendix A). Mixed-method surveys provide rich qualitative data that often goes unnoticed through other data collection methods (Braun et al., 2017; Terry & Braun, 2017). Within the open-ended questions were specific retrieval questions to determine if the participants were able to recall experiences from their time in high school, one of the selection criteria mentioned above (Marsden & Wright, 2010). Acting as a screening survey, I was able to gather standard information from each participant and select a subset of participants to interview about their experience with the phenomenon. Participants from this survey questionnaire who met the criteria and agreed to participate were invited to participate in in-depth interviews and reflective journal writing. The selected participants consented before beginning the process, which allowed for a deeper understanding and insight into the phenomenon.

Through electronic means of communication such as email, texts, and social media, any individuals willing to participate in the study were asked to complete the mixed-methods survey through online communication. The information garnered from the survey questions allowed me, as the researcher, to determine which participants would have the most experience with the phenomenon to ensure thick descriptions could be developed to increase transferability (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Participants with more to say about the phenomenon, with the goal of recruiting eight, were invited to the study's second phase, in-depth interviews.

Interviews

Many types of interviews have become ingrained into our society (Patton, 2015). Within qualitative research, interviews are viewed as a rich source of data that allows researchers to understand phenomena in-depth and within context and develop

comprehensive meanings (deMarrais & Lapan, 2003; Lincoln, 1992). According to deMarrais and Lapan (2003), an interview is more of a conversation between the researcher and the participant focused on questions related to the research study. However, it is more than just a conversation surrounding the research topic; it is a discourse in which the researcher and participant build meaning surrounding the phenomenon together (Mishler, 1986).

As this study utilized a narrative inquiry lens, it is important to note that interviews were viewed as a data source within the methods (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007). I took the participants on a journey to become storytellers through sharing their experiences. According to Savin-Baden and Van Niekerk (2007), it is the duty of the researcher to see the participants as storytellers by keeping the interview protocol open and flexible, moving with the story as it unfolds. Through this method, the participants can construct their realities through the stories they share and maintain their voice throughout the process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Therefore, the interviews were semi-structured, allowing me to probe for phenomenon-rich stories when available (see Appendix B). To ground the participants in their storytelling, the interview must begin with a clear purpose and context for the study (deMarrais & Lapan, 2003).

Interview participants were selected from the survey participants identified as having a plethora of experience with the phenomenon. Prior to beginning the in-depth interviews, participants selected a pseudonym. The in-depth interviews had a conversational tone and consisted of open-ended questions. The semi-structured interview design allowed consistency within the participants' experiences while probing for stories more deeply connected to the research questions and phenomenon. The interviews took place over Zoom to allow for the

building of trust between researcher and participant and the coding of non-verbal body language while allowing flexibility and conveniency for the participants' schedules. However, phone interviews were offered if that is convenient for the participant. During an intensive interview, the conversation often feels one-sided as the researcher guides the participants in sharing their experiences about the research topic (Charmaz, 2014; 2015). With each question, the participant reveals more about themselves and the phenomenon through a conversational tone to ensure the participant does not feel interrogated (Gubrium & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005). Upon completion of the interview, participants were asked to respond to an open-ended journal prompt to use as a third data source, which is discussed in the subsequent section.

Personal Documents

Documents, according to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), are materials that can be developed by the researcher in the form of personal documents, identified as official documents of an organization, and accessed as cultural documents that "entertain, persuade, and enlighten the public" (p. 64). Similarly, Grbich (2013) describes documents as "any information that can shed light on your research question" (p. 17). A wide array of documents is often used within qualitative research, including diaries, journals, and public documents (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Bowen, 2009).

Many types of documents were collected for this study. Elicited documents included the open-ended questions from the mixed-methods survey (see Appendix A), additional open-ended responses or journal entries (see Appendix C) collected solely from the in-depth interview participants, and reflective memoing from the data collection and analysis process (Charmaz, 2014). Throughout this study, I recorded descriptive field notes and kept a journal

to allow for the development of a snapshot or a "slice of life" from the process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Collecting the three data sources from all participants allowed for a three-dimensional method of putting their whole stories together (Clandinin, 2006).

Data Organization and Management

As the first data source was a mixed-method survey, the quantitative data collected is presented and displayed within tables in Chapter 4 to support the clarity of the commonalities within the data. The in-depth interviews were recorded on a main and backup tape recorder. The tape recorders were able to plug directly into a password-protected computer to allow for uploading to a secure server. The in-depth interviews were also transcribed using a program designed for qualitative interview transcription, allowing quick access to the interview transcriptions and aiding in the analysis process. The transcription program is a CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software). According to Grbich (2013), CAQDAS aids in the storage, organization, and management of the coding phases across multiple data sources. Therefore, the documents, field notes, memos, and all other data were also be stored within this system. Utilizing this kind of system allowed the maintenance and organization of the evolving and complex coding systems (Saldaña, 2015).

As helpful as computer systems were in maintaining the organization of data, they cannot deduce the analysis (Morse, 2010). I used a manual coding process to complement the computer-assisted method. This approach gave me a more in-depth understanding of the data and aided in identifying emerging themes that might not have been captured through software alone. Manual coding also allows for more flexibility in the analysis process, as new codes can be added or existing ones modified when new insights emerge (Saldaña, 2015). Additionally, I created a touchback point with my participants to allow for the co-

construction of the narrative and to ensure their story was whole and complete. The final set of narrative data gleaned from these organization and management processes is secured in the office of the primary researcher and will remain there for seven years.

Data Analysis Procedures

Grbich (2013) discusses the differences between qualitative and quantitative research, highlighting the critical characteristics of qualitative research such as its focus on exploring complex phenomena in natural settings, its emphasis on subjective meaning, and its reliance on flexible and iterative data collection and analysis processes. Grbich also outlines the key stages of the qualitative research process, including data collection, data analysis, and interpretation. She emphasizes the importance of reflexivity and the role of the researcher in shaping the research process and interpreting the findings. Within this study, I have a personal tie to my research, as all researchers should, and being reflexive throughout the data collection and analysis process will be vital to maintaining reliability and trustworthiness.

As this study was conducted through a solo lens of narrative inquiry, it was vital to rely deeply on the analysis procedures from that field. Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional analysis was central to this process combined with Grbich's (2013) elements of socio-cultural analysis as I explored the three contextual variables of temporality, sociality, and place within the "secret stories" of students with disabilities. I first provide Grbich 's (2013) explanations of socio-cultural analysis which will help me understand "not only culture, ideology and socialization, they also provide insights to the political and historical climates impacting the storyteller's lives- like stones dropped into the water, the ripples reach out in ever-increasing circles" (p. 221). I must know how sociocultural contexts shape participants' stories.

Sociocultural Analysis

Narrative inquiry provides an opportunity for participants to share stories in a way that is meaningful to them. It allows for exploring individual experiences and perspectives that might have yet to be visible through other research methods. Narrative inquiry recognizes the significance of context, including social and cultural factors, in shaping participants' stories (Grbich, 2013). As seen through the discussion above, it is clear that narrative inquiry centers around stories and lived experiences and aligns perfectly with capturing student voices in special education. Students with disabilities often have unique experiences navigating the education system, and narrative inquiry allows them to share their stories in their own words, providing rich data that goes beyond standardized tests or clinical observations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Additionally, it is important to gather that narrative inquiry considers the individual story and the social context that shapes it (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Socio-cultural narrative analysis recognizes the power of storytelling as a means of constructing and negotiating identities, challenging dominant narratives, and fostering social change (Bruner, 1986), as well as emphasizes the importance of context in understanding narratives (Gee, 2000). By examining the ways in which individuals and communities use stories to make sense of their experiences, we gain valuable insights into the complexities of human life and culture of the participants.

Three-dimensional Analysis

In general, narrative inquiry examines human lives by honoring their experiences as vital information to gain understanding. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative researchers analyze stories using three dimensions: temporality, sociality, and place. *Temporality* refers to the time frame of the stories, considering how past experiences,

present realities, and future aspirations shape the narratives. *Sociality* focuses on the social context in which the stories are told, including the relationships between participants and the influence of their social circles. *Place acknowledges* the physical and metaphorical settings of the stories, recognizing how location and environment can impact experiences. In the context of my research, temporality was crucial for understanding how participants' experiences have evolved and how they envision the future. Sociality through exploring participation in special education was a significant construct of the narratives to capture how participants interact with the administration, teachers, peers, and other adults. Finally, the place was considered by investigating the role of schools in shaping the stories participants share. It is not abnormal for narrative researchers to move seamlessly within timelines when reporting on the narratives within their data. Moreover, stories hold much importance within the qualitative research domain. They reveal societal patterns and entail the sharing of lived experiences (Patton, 2015). Within this study, I utilized the participants' stories to bring to light the role their voices played in their academic outcomes.

Employing this three-dimensional analysis of the rich data collected through a sociocultural lens seamlessly allowed for recurring themes and patterns to appear within the narrative. By analyzing the stories from a sociocultural perspective, underlying themes that reflect the participants' experiences, identities, and the broader cultural context was uncovered. This thematic analysis allows for a more nuanced understanding of the participants' perspectives and the ways in which their stories intersect with larger social and cultural forces Thematic analysis was utilized to begin analyzing and interpreting the data and began the coding process that allowed for the narrative analysis (Kim, 2016).

Coding in Narrative Analysis

Once stories are collected from all three data sources, all qualitative data was coded through a descriptive and interpretive coding process (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Miles & Huberman, 1994). This process began with becoming familiar with the participants' stories through multiple reads and immersion in the data. An initial coding stage occurred where key elements, events, characters, and settings were identified to create descriptive codes. Once initial codes were assigned, I looked for patterns and relationships between codes to create themes within the data. Finally, these themes were used to restory and weave into narratives to contextualize across contexts and ultimately begin deriving meaning (Kim, 2016).

After collecting the data through transcribing and storing the participant surveys, interviews, and documents and spending time analyzing the data for patterns and themes, the patterns and themes were utilized to create a narrative and, ultimately, meaning from the stories. However, there is more to this analysis method than just collecting stories. The stories are considered as the data set and interpreting the story, or developing the narrative, is the analysis of the data (Bell, 2002; Bochner, 2001). These three-dimensional stories are built from retelling past and present experiences and offer possible future plotlines for the participants through the data collected by analyzing the situation, continuity, and interaction. Multiple stories can be told from the same data set based on the researcher's view (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Therefore, it is essential to have adequate data from each set to ensure the data is restored and plentiful within the analysis process.

The three data sources from each participant were viewed as one whole story to build upon Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry process and

explore the three contextual variables of time, place, and relationships. Through a sociocultural lens, the stories were retold as "meaningful, coherent entities" (Grbich, 2013, p. 221). Sociocultural analysis, as a form of narrative analysis, emphasizes how social and cultural factors shape individual experiences and identities (Adama et al., 2016; Berger & Luckmann, 1990; Mercer, 2004). It explores the interplay between personal narratives and broader societal forces. Further, it investigates how power structures, social norms, and cultural values influence individual agency and opportunities by examining how language, communication, and social interactions construct and reinforce social meanings. By situating participants' stories within their sociocultural context, including time, place, and relationships, I was able to analyze power dynamics, discourse patterns, and the intersecting influences of their identities to allow for the three-dimensional narrative to form naturally. Throughout this process, I explored the content and context, compare the participant stories, and interpret the stories based on my position and understanding (Grbich, 2013). I looked for commonalities and differences within the themes of each participant to build a cohesive narrative analysis addressing the phenomenon of the role of student voice within special education.

Limitations Including Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

There are several limitations, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), that may constitute potential weaknesses within this qualitative study. One such limitation includes researcher bias. A qualitative researcher holds a certain level of bias that impacts validity (Maxwell, 2013). This bias can arise from entering the data collection process with a particular data set that fits an existing theory the researcher holds. My current role as an AVID Coordinator and the fact that I believe every student has a right to an appropriate and

equitable education could present itself as researcher bias. To combat this, I must address the personal values and expectations that influence the data collection process. Addressing the biases held through utilizing more than one data source and member checking or allowing the participants to review the data allowed me to maintain integrity throughout the proposal and process.

Another limitation is that the study utilizes interviews as the primary source of data collecting. According to Crites (1979), participants can deceive themselves when retelling their experiences. As this study is a narrative study relying on the retelling of participants' experiences, this leads to a limitation. Participants who have a history of struggling in school may not be as willing to answer the interview questions in a detailed, vulnerable way necessary to combat this limitation. To address this limitation, I established trust as a researcher by ensuring participant protection through pseudonyms.

Validity and Reliability

Validity is a method to develop the trustworthiness of the proposed study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). How might I be wrong? Within qualitative research, validity can become quite controversial (Maxwell, 2013) because validity is closely connected to quantitative analysis, as the term often relates to the accuracy of measurements. According to Maxwell (2013), validity is the credibility and correctness of an explanation within qualitative research. Developing validity within a research study does not equate to ultimate truth within the generated theory; it is more so developing intentional strategies to address the validity threats present within the study.

According to Maxwell (2013), guarding against reactivity, the influence the researcher holds over the setting, or participants, helps to ensure the validity of a study.

Rather than trying to influence the reactivity the researcher holds, it is more important to address how the influence affects the validity of the participant's interactions. Eliminating the impact of this reactivity is almost impossible. Therefore, the focus is more on determining how to utilize the influence appropriately. Within qualitative research, this influence is more likely to be held within participant interviews than in natural settings of observations. As in-depth interviews were this study's primary source of participant data, intentional strategies to reduce this reactivity were necessary. One way to ensure validity is to avoid leading questions within the interviews (Maxwell, 2013).

Reliability ensures that the instruments within the study measure what they are intended to measure and is a precondition for validity (Mills, 2011). Within the study, the methods are designed to collect information regarding the post-secondary experiences of students who have been involved in secondary special education. Member checking was utilized to ensure reliability. Member checking can be informal and formal and involves researchers allowing participants to check for the accuracy of their responses (Cho & Trent, 2006). This process develops both the reliability and trustworthiness of the study. Validity is a precondition for reliability. "Since there can be no validity without reliability (and thus no credibility without dependability), a demonstration of the former is sufficient to establish the latter" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316). In order to maintain the reliability and, ultimately, validity I hold as a researcher, it is critical to address the biases I hold head-on throughout the conduct of the study and discussion of results.

Triangulation and Crystallization

There are several other considerations I incorporated to lessen validity threats. Triangulation within the methods of a study includes collecting data from a wide range of

sources (Maxwell, 2013). Triangulation was addressed using maximum variation sampling, as referenced previously. The data sources utilized for this study were mixed-methods questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and personal documents, which were collected from various participants. While this method aided in the decrease in validity threats, it is important to note that triangulation alone is not enough to increase validity automatically (Fielding & Fielding, 1986).

Crystallization is an alternative and more modern method to triangulation to attempt to increase validity within a study. Laurel Richardson developed the term as a method to analyze validity. Using a crystal metaphor, Richardson (2000) explains, "Crystals grow, change, alter, but are not amorphous. *Crystals* are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns, and arrays, casting off in different directions. What we see depends upon our angle of repose" (p. 934). The analysis of the questionnaire, in-depth interviews, and personal documents within a crystallization process helped develop the validity of the study, allowing for the three-dimensional analysis of the collected data.

Ethical Considerations

The Belmont Report (National Commission, 1979) outlines the guidelines that must be carried out when human subjects are involved in research. These guidelines revolve around three fundamental principles:

- *Respect for Persons*: Each person is viewed as an autonomous individual with self-determination ability and thus must have the opportunity to participate with informed consent within the study. Those unable to make the informed consent independently due to age, disability, or other circumstances may limit their ability to self-select into the study and are entitled to more rigorous protection from the researcher.

- *Beneficence*: Participants are treated in an ethical manner, and the research should do no harm while creating increased benefits for those participating and society as a whole.

- *Justice*: The researcher utilizes procedures that are fair and standard while distributing the benefits and risks of the research equally.

Addressing these principles within the study will ensure ethical treatment is considered. Prior to their participation, individuals were given a letter of informed consent. The letter detailed all risks and benefits of the study while advising participants that the study was strictly voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. The results of the study were shared with participants and the community to ensure that maximum benefits were achieved from participation. Participants also had the option to withdraw their involvement at any time throughout the process.

To further the ethical considerations within the study, permission was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB is a governing body established to protect the rights of human subjects within research projects. As a researcher who had direct contact with subjects, I participated in the Collaborative Institution Training Initiative (CITI) modules to maximize the assurance of human subject protection.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

As stated in Chapter 1, the history of special education in the United States is infiltrated with systemic power imbalances that marginalize student voices, particularly within the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process, where decisions are often dominated by adults (Liu et al., 2018). Student voice plays a critical role in post-secondary transition planning, yet studies indicate declining participation of students and parents in this area, raising concerns about limited opportunities to practice student agency within their educational experiences (Bergin & Logan, 2013; Liu et al., 2018). As seen in a study conducted by Lalvani (2015), there is a disconnect between adult and student perceptions of disability, which further exacerbates the power imbalances at play. Additionally, there is evidence that fostering student voice correlates with improved academic outcomes and engagement (Kahne et al., 2022), however legal mandates under IDEA continue to prioritize parental involvement over student participation until the transfer of rights at age 18 (Yell et al., 2017). It must be noted that there have been efforts to shift these power structures. Holquist and Walls' (2021) research on student voice initiatives suggests that meaningful change is possible when adults actively support student advocacy. However, students continue to remain unaware of the details and logistics of their IEPs, limiting their ability to navigate their academic challenges independently (Koca et al., 2023). Given the strong link between self-advocacy and post-secondary success (Reusen, 1996; Rosetti & Henderson, 2013), educators must discover ways for students to contribute to their IEP development and empower them to take an active role in shaping their futures (Clandinin, 2023).

The purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to highlight the voices of students with learning disabilities by exploring their personal experiences within special education and uncovering their *secret stories* (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). I entered this study with the mindset that it has not been easy for students with disabilities to navigate how they learn best. Based on my personal experiences, I developed this mindset, which led to my career path as a special educator. I formulated the concept of Mount Spededemic to represent what students with disabilities deal with daily. I compared each barrier standing in the way of students with disabilities to a piece of the mountain that would make their climb even more difficult. Originally, this mindset started as more of a funnel or an inverted triangle, with one layer pouring into the next and having a smaller influence on the next. However, when I flipped the inverted triangle on its head, it was clear that these barriers made more of a mountain that more clearly represented the rigorous climb ahead of students with disabilities. Within this mindset, my original purpose became clear – to determine what students need to successfully make it to the top of this mountain. This purpose held true throughout the remainder of the study.

This study aimed to uncover common themes that could inform better support for future students with disabilities in the K-12 setting. Grounded in Cook-Sather's (2006) definition of student voice, which emphasizes both presence and power in decision-making, the study focused on the participants' perceptions of their involvement in the IEP process to uncover commonalties that could be replicated. Through using surveys, in-depth interviews, and reflective journals, three-dimensional narratives were constructed to understand participants' hidden, sacred, and cover stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). By interpreting these narratives, this study sought to highlight how fostering student voice within special

education can lead to increased student agency and academic success (Bell, 2002; Bochner, 2001; Clandinin & Connelly, 2020). One central question and three sub-questions served as a guide throughout the research and analysis process:

Central question: What are the stories (secret, sacred, and cover) that students in special education narrate about using their voices in their educational experiences?

- How do students use their voices in educational decision-making conversations?
- What are students' most significant challenges in utilizing their voices in the IEP process?
- What do students have to say about the support they need to have a voice in their educational experiences?

This study relied on narrative inquiry grounded in Dewey's (1938) theory of experience and valued the lived experiences of the participants as key sources of knowledge (Clandinin, 2023), to highlight the complexities students with disabilities face in being heard in their education experiences. Different from Todorov's narratology, narrative inquiry operates within three dimensions—temporality, sociality, and place—allowing for a dynamic exploration of participants' stories (Clandinin, 2023; Patton, 2015; Seiki, 2014). Through co-constructed narratives, this method uncovers patterns in individual experiences, making it well-suited for examining student voice in special education (Maxwell, 2013; Moriarty, 2011; Patton, 2015). By prioritizing storytelling, this study amplified voices often overlooked, providing deeper insight into how students with disabilities experience and assert their agency in education (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Relying on a multi-layered data collection approach, a comprehensive understanding of participants' educational experiences was created through a written questionnaire survey,

in-depth interviews, and reflective journal prompts. While the questionnaire incorporates both qualitative and quantitative questions, its primary function was to identify participants whose responses indicate rich narratives for further exploration (Braun et al., 2017; Terry & Braun, 2017). Those who met the study's criteria were invited for in-depth interviews, the central data collection method, allowing for a deeper exploration of their perceptions, emotions, and experiences (Patton, 2015). To enhance depth and context, participants also completed reflective journal prompts, providing additional insights beyond the interview setting. This layered approach ensured a three-dimensional understanding of their experiences within their social and cultural contexts (Grbich, 2013; Clandinin, 2006). By combining multiple qualitative methods, the study fostered rich, conversational engagement with participants while mitigating the limitations of any single data source (Patton, 2015).

Within this chapter, I will reflect on the research process, and a profile of the research participants for all data sources will be summarized. The data collection process will be detailed along with the data analysis process. The findings within each data source will be presented individually and then synthesized to address the research questions and allow for summary and conclusions. A two-step coding process was utilized to make meaning of the three-dimensional stories of the participants. The narratives of the eight participants are presented, followed by an analysis of common themes and sub-themes identified in the narrative to address the research questions. Overarching themes across the participants within all three data sources were discovered to build upon the Mount Spedemic metaphor discussed in Chapter 2.

Participants

Participants were recruited through social media, electronic communication, and snowball sampling (Patton, 2015) by recommending other individuals who may volunteer for participation in the study. All volunteers meeting the following criteria were invited to participate in the study: (a) experience with special education, specifically at the high school level, and (b) a minimum of 18 years of age. While there were 22 individuals who accessed the initial survey, some were incomplete or were unwilling to continue to the interview phase. In total, 12 individuals completed the entire survey, and eight volunteered to complete phase two of the study, which included in-depth interviews and journal reflection prompts. Table 1 describes the demographics of the eight interview participants.

Six of the interview participants ranged from 20 – 30 years old, one younger than 20 and one older than 30. Half of the interviewees were female, and half were male. Most of the participants were White (N=7) and had nine or more years of IEP experience (N=6). Of the eight participants, half only completed High school, two are currently in college, and two have completed a bachelor's degree.

Table 1

Sample Demographics of Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender identification	Race	Highest Level of Education	Years with an IEP
Conrad	22	Male	White	Some college	11
Billy	30	Male	White	Bachelor's degree	10
Koa	31	Male	White	High school	9
Eretria	21	Female	White	High school	13
Bryan	18	Male	White	High school	13
Elizabeth	29	Female	White	Bachelor's degree	9
Allison	23	Female	White	High school	4
Sarah	20	Female	African American	Some college	8

Reflections: Research Actions

As mentioned above, there were three parts to this study's data collection: the survey, in-depth interviews, and reflection journal prompts. The initial survey (Appendix A) consisted of 13 questions that included five demographic questions (1–5) and seven mixed methods questions pertaining to their use of voice within their educational experience (6–12). The last question asked their willingness to participate in the next phases of the study. Findings from the quantitative pieces of the survey are displayed in Tables 2 and 3.

The majority of participants reported ages between 18 and 20, however the overall age range of the participants only spreads to 31. Most were female, while none of the participants identified as non-binary. The race breakdown of the participants indicated the most discrepancy, with 75% being White. Only 16.67% of the group had completed a college degree at the time of completing the survey; the rest of the participants had completed high school, with four having completed some college. All participants had an IEP for at least one year, with half having an IEP for 5 – 10 years.

Table 2

Demographics of Larger Sample

Questions/Answers	%	Count
What is your age?		
18 – 20	41.67%	5
21 – 25	33.33%	4
26 – 31	25.00%	3
Total	100%	12
What is your gender?		
Male	41.67%	5
Female	58.33%	7
Non-binary	0.00%	0
Total	100%	12

Questions/Answers	%	Count
What is your race?		
American Indian or Alaska Native	8.33%	1
Asian	0.0%	0
Black or African American	16.67%	2
Hispanic or Latino	0.00%	0
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.00%	0
White	75.00%	9
Total	100%	12
What is your highest level of education completed?		
High School	50.00%	6
Some college	33.33%	4
Associate Degree	0.00%	0
Bachelor's Degree	16.67%	2
Master's Degree or beyond	0.00%	0
Technical/Trade school	0.00%	0
Total	100%	12
How many years did you have an IEP?		
1 – 4	8.33%	1
5 – 10	50.00%	6
11 – 13	41.67%	5
Total	100%	12

Note. $N = 12$

Table 3

Knowledge and Attitudes

Question/Answers	%	Count
How familiar are you with the concept of student voice in special education?		
Not familiar at all	16.67%	2
Slightly familiar	0.00%	0
Moderately familiar	16.67%	2
Very familiar	16.67%	2
Extremely familiar	16.67%	2
No answer	33.32%	4
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "Student voice is essential for effective special education services"?		
Strongly disagree	0.00%	0
Somewhat disagree	8.33%	1
Neutral	0.00%	0
Somewhat agree	25.00%	3

Question/Answers	%	Count
Strongly agree	66.67%	8
No answer	0.00%	0
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "I was involved in my IEP meetings"?		
Strongly disagree	0.00%	0
Somewhat disagree	8.33%	1
Neutral	8.33%	1
Somewhat agree	33.34%	4
Strongly agree	50.00%	6
No answer	0.00%	0

In terms of knowledge and attitudes, participants were asked three quantitative questions, depicted in Table 3. Within the literature, student voice definitions range from students simply sharing their opinions to collaborating with adults to solve problems to fully taking charge of a change initiative within the school building (Mitra, 2018). Only two participants were not familiar with the term student voice as it is used in the literature. All but one participant indicated that they believed that student voice was essential for special education services to be effective. Student voice is linked to student agency, primarily when the school provides opportunities for student voice within the IEP process (Cook-Sather, 2006). More than 88% of the participants agreed that they were involved in their IEP meetings, indicating that the school provided them with opportunities to practice their agency and use their voice.

In addition to these quantitative questions, the survey consisted of four qualitative questions that were coded with the interview and reflection journal prompts for each participant to build their three-dimensional narratives. There was not as much immediate completion of the survey as originally hoped, which made me wonder if the target demographic had some unintentional barriers when completing the initial survey. As

previously mentioned, 22 individuals volunteered to complete the survey, but only 12 completed it in its entirety. On average, the 12 participants spent about 15 minutes completing all components of the survey. Additionally, when I reflected on the former students I have had that fall within this target demographic, I was reminded of the amount of prompting they needed in high school to complete a task and wondered if this carried over into adulthood and played a role in the amount of people who fully completed the initial survey. Nonetheless, eight individuals with unique stories to tell about their use of voice within their special education experience fully completed the initial survey and were selected to complete reflection journal prompts and participate in the interview process.

Upon completing the survey, participants indicated their willingness to continue to phase two and three of the study. In all, nine individuals volunteered to continue and shared their contact information. Out of those nine, eight individuals responded to the scheduling email and completed the second and third phases of the study. The average interview lasted 20 minutes, which was much shorter than initially anticipated. As participants completed the initial survey and indicated their willingness to continue, they were contacted via email to select a 45-minute time slot through Calendly based on mutual availability. All participants completed the interview over Zoom and had the option to turn their camera on or keep it off.

The eight interviews took place over the course of six weeks. Each participant and I had some prior rapport, as a teacher, co-worker, or peer. However, that did not mean that they were not nervous to speak about their experiences in special education, a lot of them for the first time. To ease this nervousness, I took time at the beginning of each interview to express how proud I was that they were taking the opportunity to share their story and how much power they have to make a difference in future students with disabilities' experiences. I

allowed space for participants to build upon the stories they were sharing by prompting them to expand and go deeper when they felt comfortable.

At the end of the interview, I turned off the recording and thanked them for their time. I also laid out the next steps, which included that they would receive a link to one more Qualtrics survey of journal reflection prompts to complete within a week of the conclusion of the interview. Doing so allowed some flexibility for the participants while keeping the discussion of the interview fresh in their minds. Participants were asked to provide the pseudonym they utilized for the initial questionnaire so that the reflections could be linked to their overall data set. Participants were asked to reflect on their overall feelings that occurred during the interview, provided space to expand on any questions that were difficult to answer or they forgot to mention while being recorded, and allowed the opportunity to provide feedback on the current processes of including student voice in special education. These answers were analytically coded alongside their initial surveys and interviews to complete their three-dimensional narrative. Participants spent an average of 10 minutes completing these journal reflection prompts.

Validity and Reliability

As discussed in Chapter 3, to support the validity and reliability of this study, it is vital to acknowledge and address the potential researcher bias I hold stemming from my role as an AVID Coordinator and my belief in equitable education for all students. Recognizing that these personal values could influence data collection, I utilized multiple data sources and incorporated member checking, allowing participants to review and verify their responses to alleviate possible bias. Member checking also served as a method to promote reliability by allowing participants to confirm the accuracy of their responses, either formally or informally

(Cho & Trent, 2006). This process strengthened both the reliability and overall trustworthiness of the study.

In preparation for this study, I learned about the unethical conditions that required the Belmont Report and passed the appropriate CITI exams to minimize the risks to all participants (Sims, 2010). Upon successful completion of defending my proposal to my committee, I sought approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB approves and oversees all researchers conducting studies with human subjects to ensure ethical dilemmas do not arise. This approval process took about two months, with back-and-forth revisions to the initial survey to ensure participants were protected throughout the study. I was able to begin collecting data in early December of 2024. Initially, I envisioned the data collection process moving much quicker, but data was fully collected by the end of January 2025. After collecting all of data from each participant, I engaged in the data analysis process, which included the two-step coding process detailed above. I immersed myself in this analysis process for about a month and a half before I felt confident with the findings to begin drafting the results and implications. I leaned on my chair during this time to provide guidance and feedback during this process before the final committee review and defense process in April of 2025. This prolonged timeframe within the research field added to the validity of this study.

A limitation of this study was the level of vulnerability of participants with a history of academic struggles needed to provide in-depth responses during interviews. To address this, I prioritized establishing trust with participants by ensuring their protection through the use of pseudonyms. I fostered an environment where they feel comfortable sharing their experiences as best as possible within the virtual interview setting. Given that in-depth

interviews are the primary source of data collection, minimizing researcher influence is crucial within this aspect is key. One strategy to enhance validity is avoiding leading interview questions (Maxwell, 2013). This was especially important as the data collection process went further along and overarching themes became apparent. My initial idea surrounding this topic of student voice in special education was formulated into a metaphor built throughout Chapter 2 of students climbing a mountain to advocate for their educational experiences. This metaphor was continued as themes were developed throughout the narrative of the eight participants.

Data Analysis

To develop themes from the data, I applied a combination of enumerative content analysis (Miles et al., 2020) and narrative analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Grbich, 2013) to code and interpret each participant's three-dimensional narrative. I began by conducting enumerative analysis and assigning descriptive codes to the initial survey responses, interview transcripts, and journal reflections. According to Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020), these descriptive codes serve as "labels that assign symbolic meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study" (p. 71). Once the descriptive codes were established, I organized them into related clusters, known as "pattern codes" or interpretive codes (p. 86). These interpretive codes were then synthesized into overarching themes, which Creswell (2013) defines as "broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea" (p. 186). A summary of these themes is presented in Table 4 below.

One of the central ideas discussed by Miles et al. (2020) is the importance of being aware of your researcher biases within the coding process of qualitative data. One way to

control your personal bias within the coding process is to develop themes and patterns from the data rather than starting with preconceived theories of what will emerge from the data. Objectively viewing the data is important in all forms of data collection, specifically interviews for this study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Miles et al., 2020; Patton, 2015). As a researcher, I hold a bias within my perception of barriers for students within special education based on the experiences I have had as an educator. It was important within the data analysis to control this bias by referring to Code Book 1 from previous participants to guide the development of themes and patterns in subsequent participants and not beginning with looking for barriers within the data. This allowed for reflexivity within the research process and interpretation of the findings (Grbich, 2013). Within this study, I have a personal tie to my research, as all researchers should, and being reflexive throughout the data collection and analysis process will be vital to maintaining reliability and trustworthiness.

Further, I have a personal connection to each one of my participants. The individuals who completed the initial survey and indicated a willingness to participate in the interviews and journal reflection prompts have each known me in some capacity for varying amounts of time. This makes using pseudonyms even more important to ensure their identities are protected. Additionally, I utilized field notes and memoing to monitor my feelings and biases while collecting and forming the participants' narratives. Participants also had the opportunity to review their narrative to ensure their story was accurate and complete. The narratives of each participant are reported below.

Narratives of Eight Participants

In this narrative inquiry, I share the lived experiences of eight participants, in the order they were interviewed, through the lens of a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space:

temporality within the past, present, and future, sociality in terms of personal and social relationships, and place or the specific contexts in which their stories unfold (Clandinin, 2023; Seiki, 2014). Each narrative begins by introducing the participant and situating our relationship as context for their experiences, honoring the relational nature of narrative inquiry. The stories then move through time, highlighting formative past experiences, present realities, and future hopes. I attend closely to the personal and social interactions shaping each participant's journey and the significance of the places where their stories are lived and told. Throughout the narratives, I give attention to sociocultural context (Grbich, 2013) as resonant threads or recurring themes emerge that speak to the complexity and richness of their experiences. Social, cultural, and political context shapes the meaning of individuals or organizations (Grbich, 2013). Finally, I offer moments of reflection, acknowledging my own positioning in the research and the ongoing nature of each participant's story.

Conrad's Story

Conrad grew up in a Midwest suburban town and continues to reside in there. I first met Conrad when he was a freshman in high school and on the brink of a transition in his life, moving from middle school to high school. I recall Conrad's desire to do well and hunger to learn during that time. He spent 11 years out of his 13 in public education receiving special education services. He is now 22, and I am honored that he wanted to participate in this study and share his story. When we first sat down for his interview, I was impressed with how well-spoken and articulate he had become as an adult. I immediately wrote, "Wow, Conrad appears so confident when he speaks" (Field note, December 2024). This confidence carried throughout his interview as he shared pieces of his past that he had not had the opportunity to share before.

Conrad's story began with his elementary school experience. He recalled his displeasure with his time in elementary school, expressing, "I was not impressed with how I was treated during elementary school. I felt that they were just passing the buck and not wanting me to succeed" (Initial survey, November 2024). He connected this feeling to the reason he bounced around to many different elementary schools, explaining, "when I was younger, I had outbursts, and then when an outburst would happen, they [school administrators] were like, 'okay, we're done,' and then send me off to a different school" (Interview, December 2024). Although I work in a high school, I was left shocked that he experienced adults giving up on him at such a young age. This is the first time we see a sacred story for Conrad: he had no choice but to move from school to school which revealed to him that adults know best. These early questions about his elementary years brought up painful memories for him. "Mostly just the questions about my past in elementary school. They made me feel a bit uncomfortable just because it was a dark time for me" (Journal entry, December 2024). A portion of his secret story was shared during his recollections of his elementary years: Conrad struggled with adult relationships while struggling to learn how to learn.

After troubling times when trying to feel heard and accepted in his educational experiences, he finally made it to high school, where he first reported feeling like his voice and input mattered:

> Yes, I was always involved with my IEP meeting in high school. It made me actually feel that I had a say in my schooling—my life. It made me want to make sure that I did good, because I saw all the people who are supporting me. (Initial survey, November 2024)

When reflecting on this experience, Conrad shared that even though it was hard to revisit his past, he saw value in it as he wrote, "it [the interview] did bring up some upsetting emotions,

but not unexpected. Even though it was upsetting, it was good to share my past. It could be used to help others" (Journal entry, December 2025). This piece of Conrad's story speaks to the growth he has exhibited within his cover story. As I stated earlier, Conrad exuded a confidence I had not seen before, indicating that the story he now portrays to the public is one of resilience and determination.

After high school, Conrad went to a local community college, where he learned the importance of self-advocacy after realizing there was less direct support than in his K–12 experience. Now, Conrad works as a Senior Technician and comes across as optimistic in about opportunities available to him within a post-secondary setting. Hearing how far he has come since those defeating days in elementary school gave me hope for future students with disabilities. I wrote, "There is HOPE for the students that struggle throughout their education" (Field note, December 2024). He credits much of his success to pushing through, stating**,** "Me being here now is proof that I'm stronger now and doing good" (Journal entry, December 2024).

During his interview, Conrad articulated his feelings and did not appear hesitant when sharing his story. His narrative grew from a timid student with strong emotions who felt as though no one wanted him to succeed to a young man who found his voice and finally felt the support he had been searching for throughout his time on an IEP. He told stories of supportive case managers along the way (especially at the high school level), individualized accommodations, and acceptance for his uniqueness. Outside of the support Conrad finally felt during his final few years of public education; he had a supportive mother fighting for his voice behind the scenes throughout his entire special education experience. I noted these adults who supported him within my field notes.

Much of Conrad's story, shared in his initial survey, interview, and journal entries, took place within public education school buildings, as the questions were geared toward those experiences. Within this context, it was clear that the elementary school setting developed dark feelings, leaving Conrad feeling broken and like he was a lost cause. He reflected, "The change I'd like to see in education is to help the kids to not feel that they are broken or a lost cause. But help them realize that they just have to work a bit harder. Everyone has their own struggles. Life is not going to be easy, so make sure you are able to identify those who want to support you" (Journal entry, December 2024). Conrad's secret, sacred, and cover stories overlap within this reflection. It is clear that Conrad felt discouraged and broken in elementary school, which caused him to be closed off from adults in future education settings. Until you get to know Conrad, you will not be privy to this portion of his secret story. However, there is now a glimmer of hope within his cover story as he preaches the importance of finding supportive adults for students with disabilities in similar situations.

A thread of perseverance was woven throughout Conrad's story. In addition to having a reading disability, Conrad had to battle against adults in his life who told him he was not good enough and chose to give up on him because of the big emotions he felt as a young student. When some students would allow those words to determine their worth, Conrad fought against them.

> If you're struggling with asking for help like I do, I know that it's difficult because you want to prove yourself. Just remember, the people who will support you won't think any less of you because you have to ask for help. (Journal entry, 2024)

Through his perseverance, he was able to find those that supported him, such as his high school case manager who invited him to IEP meetings and genuinely wanted his input. Moreover, Conrad realized after graduating high school and attending community college

that giving up on yourself is not an option. While the support he felt looked different, the perseverance that he was able to develop throughout his K–12 experience allowed him to continue to navigate his learning disability and find those in his life who wanted to support him in his long-term success.

While listening to Conrad's story, I felt my heart break for the young boy I did not have the chance to know, and at the same time, I was inspired by his resilience. I found myself reflecting on my own elementary experience and searching for commonalities to relate to Conrad. However, I was often left wondering how teachers and administrators could not be supporting the young man I knew in high school when he was at an even more vulnerable time navigating his learning disability diagnosis. As Conrad continues to navigate adulthood with his reading disability, I am curious to follow up to hear how he navigates the level of support he will deal with in various workplaces in the future.

Billy's Story

Billy grew up in a Midwest suburban town and after moving to various states for his employment as an equipment manager has resettled back in his hometown. I have personally known Billy for quite some time, which made me very hopeful that he would be willing to be a part of this study. Billy was diagnosed with a reading disability when he was in third grade and spent the rest of his time in public education with the support of an IEP. He navigated through the challenges of his reading disability and enrolled in an academically rigorous program for high school. Billy is now 30 years old and has a powerful story to share.

When Billy was in elementary school, he recalled recognizing he struggled with reading, expressing, "I was a little slower" (Interview, December 2024). He felt different than his classmates at this time and experienced some bullying when he shared, "Some kids, they

see that you're weaker, and then they take the opportunity to make fun of you" (Interview, December 2024). I quickly noted how mean other kids can be and wondered what role they might play in students with disabilities' success. Billy recognized that "A challenging part [of my disability] was accepting I had a problem with learning and needed assistance" (Initial survey, December 2024). This speaks to his secret story of desperately wanting to fit in and not appear different. However, his sacred story of compliance equating to support within special education competes with his secret story. I noted the time and effort I imagine he had to put in as a young elementary student to try not to appear different, as I wrote, "He must have been exhausted trying to hide his learning difference" (Field note, December 2024).

However, once he got to middle school, he found acceptance with a group of friends. Middle school was also the first and only time he acknowledged that he enjoyed reading, and finally, having a teacher who taught differently and met his unique needs allowed Billy to find a love for reading during his eighth-grade year. He shared, "A positive moment was in 8th grade having an English teacher who made English class fun—for the first and only year in school, I could say I enjoyed English class" (Initial survey, December 2024). I made note of this teacher, wondering if this teacher would reappear throughout his story. This period marked a turning point for Billy, as he said, "That's when I found motivation to actually get better at learning and get better at writing" (Interview, December 2024).

His love for reading was short-lived as he entered high school and was met with new challenges. "Challenging moments was pushing myself in harder English classes throughout high school than I should have" (Initial survey, December 2024). I made note of a fixed mindset here for Billy, that he was the one telling himself that these English classes were too challenging. He shared that the biggest obstacle in his education was internal, saying, "The

biggest challenge is to admit I needed help. It's hard to admit you don't understand something as well as everyone else in class" (Initial survey, December 2024). Again, Billy seems to be his biggest obstacle to his learning as his internal narrative continues to tell him that he is not good enough. Despite his struggles during this time, Billy graduated high school and went to college.

After completing a bachelor's degree and working in the field of sports management for several years, he is now a stay-at-home dad raising two kids. Reflecting on his journey through education, Billy said, "The interview went well. It brought back some memories and how far I have come. It helped me remember signs of myself struggling to look for in my children as they begin to go through the school system" (Journal entry, December 2024). He added, "I had not really gone in depth about my education experience before this interview" (Journal entry, December 2024). Billy's cover story is now one of acceptance.

Throughout Billy's interview, he recalled highs and lows within the relationships in his life that were ultimately connected to his sense of self-worth within his disability. When he felt confident in who he was as someone with a reading disability, he would speak of feelings of acceptance, and when he felt discouraged with his challenges in school, he would express feeling singled out and alone. Regardless of the support he felt from his friends, Billy stressed the important role his parents played in his education. Both of his parents were principals, and "they were always heavily involved and like kept on top of it, and they always ask, is this what you need?" (Interview, December 2024). This parental involvement is unique to his story, with both of his parents having knowledge of the education system, which enabled them to advocate for him and attempt to include his voice at a young age. "I

had an opportunity to incorporate my voice once accepting I needed help. Sometimes it was harder than others to figure out what I needed to succeed" (Initial survey, December 2024).

Billy's story is contextualized within the walls of school buildings and his family home. He could share how he felt sitting in those large, cold, intimidating rooms for IEP meetings surrounded by faces of adults that held knowledge of his learning. He also recalled times of feeling support from his mom as she recorded audiobooks for him to accommodate his learning needs at home when his teachers were not available for the same support. With the tools he was able to access through the support of his parents at home, he successfully navigated through a college environment, proving that he gained strong self-advocacy skills. He noted, "Technology advancement played a big part as there were different ways of learning instead of just reading from a book" (Initial survey, December 2024). A correlated field note to this piece of Billy's story was asking myself what technology tools I have implemented for my students, "have I been incorporating enough?" (Field note, December 2024). Connecting back to Billy's sacred story, he indicated that that acknowledging the need for support is not a sign of weakness, but rather an act of agency and accepting you need the help is also the recognition that complying with the special education supports provided will lead to more success.

A common theme that emerged within Billy's story was motivation. Throughout his data set, he referenced how students with disabilities, himself included, are "not going to learn if they don't want to learn" (Interview, December 2024). This sentiment was especially true for Billy. When reflecting back on his memorable eighth-grade school year, he explains that that was when he found the motivation and self-belief to improve. I saw this as a turning point in his educational career. It was evident within his retelling that he started developing a

strong disability identity within that eighth-grade English classroom and found the motivation to absorb the knowledge that was being presented to him because his teacher "taught differently" (Interview, December 2024). Billy also shared his belief that the education system has changed, saying, "I believe the education system has come a long way in helping kids with disabilities. I would just like to see the continuous growth and show that it's okay to struggle" (Journal entry, December 2025). His advice to students like him: "Go find that one teacher you feel comfortable talking to. There is always at least one teacher in the school that can listen to you best and help you the most" (Journal entry, 2024).

Having known Billy for quite some time, I was anxious going into his interview to hear a side of his story that I was not privy to. Hearing more than the surface level or cover of his story was eye-opening as he connected his feelings about his self-worth to the acceptance he felt of those around him. The way he spoke about his teacher, who made a large difference in his education, made me wonder how his story could have been different if he had a similar experience with a teacher earlier on in his education or if he connected the same way with a teacher in high school. Additionally, his story had me reflecting on the kinds of environments I have provided for my current and former students. I hope my students are left with feelings of encouragement and motivation like Billy was able to find in late middle school.

Koa's Story

Koa grew up in a Midwest rural town and lives in another Mideast rural town. Of all the participants, Koa is the one that I have known for the shortest amount of time. He was diagnosed with a learning disability in early elementary school and discontinued receiving services when he was in high school. Therefore, he had an IEP for only nine years. Koa's

interview was one of two interviews that took place in person rather than over Zoom, allowing for more body language to be intertwined within his narrative than those only seen through a computer screen. Koa is currently 31 years old and has a unique story to share.

Koa's story began in elementary school when he was diagnosed with a learning disability during one of his first years in public education, though he could not recall exactly when. He could, however, recall how it felt to struggle in school:

> It was always a struggle for me to really understand and learn at the same pace as everybody else, it seemed like. I would understand it eventually, but it would just take a while to get me there. And it was the same way, all through school. I don't remember a time where it wasn't really like that. Yeah, it just felt different. I felt like I was almost like dumb because I couldn't do it like everybody else or figure it out like everybody else right off the bat, you know. And so, I would put myself down for that. (Interview, December 2024)

These feelings of inadequacy did not allow Koa to lay a strong foundation for learning early on. However, he credited one teacher with helping him start to feel success when he said, "The one teacher I remember being the most helpful was my third-grade teacher. He was always willing to help me and get me to understand at my own pace" (Initial survey, December 2024). This early positive experience made a lasting impression. I asked him about that teacher during his interview and his face immediately lit up. I made note of this supportive teacher, just as Billy had mentioned a specific teacher in his story. Despite this supportive teacher, Koa recalled that similar challenges persisted into middle school. His secret story at this time indicated that he depended on the support from key adults and accommodations to learn when he felt anxious about learning certain subjects. It was not until high school that he noticed a fundamental shift in his learning. Koa made enough progress on his IEP goals to be dismissed from special education services between his

freshman and sophomore years. Within these years, his sacred story starts to take shape as he realizes support is a privilege, not a right.

While Koa did not talk much about friendships in school, he did reflect on the important role his family, especially his mom, played in his education, stating, “My mom and the teachers [were] mainly the ones kind of like behind the scenes” (Interview, December 2024). He recalled bringing home progress reports monthly throughout elementary and middle school. However, during high school, his parents moved to a nearby small town to care for elderly relatives, leaving Koa to stay with a family friend to finish school. This shift marked a turning point and you could see in his body language that he felt uncomfortable sharing this piece of his story:

> During high school, my parents moved away which in turn I believe made everything change for me. Not in a bad way, but I don’t remember being as involved with IEP in high school, but also by then I felt like I had had enough previously to help me understand. (Journal entry, December 2024)

Ultimately, Koa ended up completing high school through an alternative route, and I cannot help but wonder if that would have been different if his parents had not have moved. However, it was clear in his tone of voice that he still felt support from his parents during that time; it just looked different.

Koa’s education took place in small general education classrooms due to his rural setting and smaller support settings, especially when he struggled with math. He shared, “Being able to go into a separate room with like a few other kids was helpful and have more one-on-one time to either work longer on a test or just get more assistance” (Interview, December 2024). His learning environment, within a small, rural school district, meant he had smaller class sizes and fewer resources compared to more urban districts. He noted how being in special education sometimes made him feel isolated as he shared, “I did feel like it

made me not like others and felt singled out for a long time. I do realize if I did not have this, it would have been even more challenging for myself" (Initial survey, December 2024). At this moment, in my field notes, I wrote "singled-out" and underlined it three times as it appears to become a trend I have seen so far in the narratives. I was left wondering if this singled-out feeling was sparked by similar experiences in Koa's story.

A recurring thread in Koa's story is independence. He often spoke of how he matured and adapted over time rather than relying solely on formal accommodations. His ability to grow through real-world experience helped ease the anxiety he once felt, especially in math-related tasks. "I remember with having IEP, I was able to learn at my own speed" (Initial survey, December 2024). He also emphasized how, over time, he found his rhythm and style of learning when he said, "Now I learn very quickly in the workplace, especially when someone shows me once" (Interview, December 2024). This maturity has allowed his cover story to share that he is a confident and knowledgeable adult.

Koa defined success on his terms, describing it as "Just keeping going" (Interview, December 2024) and shared that success looks different for everyone. His reflections paint a picture of someone who, although once self-conscious (secret story), grew into confidence and capability (cover story). He also shared valuable advice and hopeful reflections within his journal when he wrote, "Be strong and confident that the feelings you have will not always be there, and you just have to find their spot in life" (Journal entry, December 2024). Although Koa chose not to continue his education in a college setting, he is a lifelong learner. He now works as a painter and is a single father of two. The man I had the opportunity to interview held himself to a high standard. Without the context of this study, I would not have

known that he had struggled with learning or harbored negative thoughts about himself growing up.

Listening to Koa's story through his interview, journal, and survey responses, I was struck by his quiet resilience and reflective growth. His journey through special education was not easy, and he often did not feel involved. "I don't remember ever having an input on anything. I remember the teachers and parents doing everything for me" (Initial survey, December 2024). Despite this, Koa found his way through supportive relationships, meaningful classroom experiences, and developing self-understanding. His story stands as a testament to the lasting impact of early encouragement, the complexity of growing up with a learning disability, and the quiet power of finding your path.

Eretria's Story

Eretria currently resides in the same Midwest suburban town where she grew up. I have known Eretria since she was a senior in high school. Soft-spoken yet expressive, she approached her story with a thoughtful mix of humor and honesty. She initially hesitated to share her experience, revealing during her reflection, "I have never been able to share my experience in the past" (Journal entry, January 2025). However, the longer we spoke, the clearer it became that Eretria's narrative was shaped not just by the structure of the IEP process but by the deep, consistent connections she formed with trusted adults throughout her educational experience.

Her IEP journey began in early elementary school during a time of instability in her home life. She remembered a significant life transition; moving from her mother's care to her father's between third and fourth grade. Despite the upheaval, her IEP followed her and eased some of the transition. When she began attending her new school, she explained, "I'd go to

Mr. M's room. He had a small setting… I could just chill out, draw, color" (Interview, January 2025). This was the first time she revealed a portion of her secret story; she thrived in smaller settings and would seek those out. These quiet spaces became more than accommodations; they were havens of comfort and self-expression. Eretria often found that traditional classrooms and rigid systems did not offer her what she needed to thrive. Instead, these informal, human-centered environments allowed her to be herself. I recorded in my field notes, "What would have happened to her experience had she not been allowed to seek out those smaller places?" (January 2025).

Her high school experience brought more structured support, which she remembered positively, especially the connection with her case manager, explaining, "I'd shoot her an email, and she'd help me figure it out, or talk to my teacher" (Interview, January 2025). When hearing this, I recorded "Wow, Eretria was a lucky student. She had two adults she closely connected with and was able to find this support across school levels" (Field note, January 2025). These exchanges with her case manager often centered on challenges with academic tasks like essays or book reports, but they were made manageable through the trust she built with supportive staff. Eretria's story is rooted not only in academics but in relationships. She struggled to connect with her peers. "I didn't really interact with any of the students in my grade" (Interview, January 2025), she said. "I always interacted with the staff. Maybe because there's not a lot of drama and they're grown up." This preference for adult relationships became a defining feature of her story. It was clear that from the outside, it appeared that Eretria just enjoyed spending time with adults more, but the truth of being unable to connect with her peers was a hidden piece of her story. Like Conrad's story, we can see Eretria start to indicate a sacred story of adults knowing best as she spends her time with

them in high school. Her role as a manager on the volleyball team became another meaningful outlet. After not making the team, she was invited to support the team in another capacity, which gave her a renewed sense of purpose. “She [the coach] made a difference just by being supportive and being there. I still talk to her to this day” (Interview, January 2025).

Throughout her school years, Eretria noticed how students with IEPs were often marginalized in subtle but impactful ways. “You’re always singled out or different because you had to go to small group settings” (Initial survey, January 2025), she shared. “AGAIN, singled out!” (Field note, January 2025) I quickly jotted down as I read this piece of her survey. Her frustration extended to how students with IEPs were perceived in general:

> Most teachers see you as a child that can’t speak up for themselves. Or they think the way you are talking is incorrect. Once you hit high school they are like, oh wait, you are 15 years old. You have a voice you can use. (Initial survey, January 2025)

This evolution, from being spoken for to learning to speak up, was central to Eretria’s journey. She voiced a powerful hope for future students when she wrote, “I would like them to be able to speak up in their meetings because kids get told around by adults every day, but in all actuality, they know how they learn and not everyone learns the same” (Journal entry, January 2025). Despite the inconsistencies she experienced within the formal system, Eretria always found a way to have her voice heard. “I always found a teacher or staff member that would listen to me and they would always relay what I would say to anybody” (Journal entry, January 2025). This informal advocacy became her strength and a quiet but persistent presence throughout her schooling.

Her reflections on the IEP system were candid and underscored how repetitive the process can feel, especially when the student’s voice is left out. “I went through 12 years of an IEP and after a while it’s all kind of the same” (Journal entry, January 2025). As she

looked toward adulthood, Eretria centered her vision of success around self-sufficiency which she defined as managing money, holding a job, and communicating needs effectively. She also shared the value of nonverbal communication and social awareness. “Picking up on other people’s body language and stuff helps you figure out how to regulate yourself” (Interview, January 2025). This insight reflects a deep emotional intelligence developed through observation and experience.

Eretria’s narrative is grounded in spaces that give her calm, safety, and dignity, including Mr. M’s classroom, the principal’s office, and the volleyball court. These places contrast the impersonal nature of IEP meetings and rigid academic expectations. Eretria was able to find adult support at every level of her education, a stark contrast to other narratives within this study. I believe this unique piece of her story played a role in her success. Her secret story demonstrates that meaningful learning and growth often happen in the small moments, relationships, and spaces that allowed her to be fully seen by the adults she trusted. On the outside, one would see her cover story as one of a student who cannot seem to connect with peers and seeks to escape the classroom setting.

Listening to Eretria’s story challenged my assumptions about what meaningful support looks like in special education. Though formal systems often overlooked or underestimated her, Eretria found her ways to advocate and grow through relationships, resilience, and reflection. Her story is a reminder that success is not always defined by systems or scores but by the human connections that empower students to use their voices and shape their paths.

Bryan's Story

Bryan has received special education services since kindergarten, with an IEP focused on English Language Arts, particularly reading and writing, all within a Midwest suburban city. He is currently a senior in high school and was very excited to participate in this study. Bryan and I had developed a trusting rapport throughout him filling out his initial survey and completing his interview, which allowed him to speak candidly about his educational experiences and evolving self-perception as a learner.

Reflecting on his early years, Bryan recalled struggling with foundational skills, especially writing. "I even struggled with writing a paragraph" (Interview, January 2025). These challenges shaped his academic experience and how he viewed himself in school. His sacred story became clear early on as he connected his disability to a deficit. Early on, he viewed his IEP with skepticism and stigma as he reflected, "To be honest, when I first got on an IEP, I thought I was dumb. With being on an IEP, I thought it made me look dumb in front of everyone else" (Journal entry, January 2025). I could not help but compare Bryan's story to Billy's and Koa's when he shared this sentiment. Over time, however, that perception shifted as he stated, "but now I know it is really to help me succeed" (Journal entry, January 2025). Despite receiving services throughout his K–12 journey, Bryan sometimes questioned his need for an IEP. "Because sometimes I do have a hard time understanding the work in class, but also it's just part of me that doesn't want to do the work" (Interview, January 2025). I made a note here on the role motivation might be playing within students with disabilities' success. His reflection reveals the nuanced balance between real academic needs and internal motivation, a dynamic tension that shaped his ability to find consistent success in school.

In middle school, Bryan developed more of a voice in his IEP meetings. He recalled that, “I just talk about what I really think I need help with” (Interview, January 2025). These meetings became a space where he started to advocate for himself. He acknowledged the growing influence he had in those settings. “You get to have somewhat of a voice in your IEP meetings. They are trying to understand what will help you more to succeed” (Initial survey, January 2025). Learning how to speak up was part of a larger skill set he was building, as he described, “Punctuating [articulating] what you need to get help with and being able to speak up to get that help” (Initial survey, January 2025). This process of learning how to advocate, both for his educational needs and for himself more broadly, has been central to his growth. I wondered, “How or where do students learn this skillset? Does it need to be directly taught?” (Field note, January 2025).

Bryan’s story is also shaped by critical relationships, particularly with a dedicated special education teacher who has remained a consistent presence across his school years. “She would just come in, help me get my work done. And she would make me stay engaged with the work. Which I’m glad” (Interview, January 2025). He fondly referred to her as a “school mom” throughout his interview. I made note of this supportive relationship that is starting to appear consistent across each narrative. This type of one-on-one relationship was essential in helping him stay on track, especially after facing setbacks. During his freshman year, Bryan experienced a major disruption in his academic journey. “I got kicked out of school freshman year for something unrelated to my disability and have been trying to recover from that since” (Initial survey, January 2025). Since then, he has been working hard to get back on track. “I am trying to make sure I stay on track to graduate and have everything academically lined up. I work hard to pass my classes and take summer school

when needed" (Initial survey, January 2025). His willingness to share this part of his journey is reflective of his broader personal growth and acceptance of his story.

High school has been a space where Bryan's success is still being shaped. "Sometimes I'm actually engaged with class and actually doing my work. Other times I'm just laying there with my head down" (Interview, January 2025). I connected this piece back to his discussion of the lack of motivation that he sometimes feels in school. "How do you teach a student how to be motivated or care about their education?" (Field note, January 2025). His honesty reveals how fluctuating motivation and emotional readiness can play a role in a student's ability to succeed. Yet Bryan understands that showing up, even on hard days, is its own kind of success. It is starting to become clear that Bryan shares a cover story of someone who chooses when to learn and appears to not care about his learning however his secret story reveals that he is a student who wants to do well; he just does not have the skill set to do so every day.

Looking ahead, Bryan defined success in terms of independence: being prepared for life's unpredictability, holding a job, managing finances, and taking care of himself. He hopes to build a future that reflects resilience, adaptability, and self-reliance. Bryan's story is a reminder that special education is not just about accommodations; it is about people. For him, the support has mattered, but the relationships have mattered more. Having someone consistently believe in him, push him, and check in daily has been the difference between disengagement and forward motion. His story also challenges deficit-based views of students with IEPs by showing how powerful it can be when a student is trusted to reflect, advocate, and grow. As a researcher and educator, I am struck by the depth of Bryan's insight. His journey is not without setbacks, but he continues to show up, learn, and move forward. His

progress may not always be linear, but it is real. Bryan's evolving voice and growing confidence in advocating for himself show a young person preparing to navigate the world with honesty, self-awareness, and grit.

Elizabeth's Story

Elizabeth grew up in a rural Midwest city and is now a special educator within a large district in a suburban Midwest city. Elizabeth and I had connected previously through education networks, and this familiarity allowed for a natural, open conversation that reflected trust and ease. As she shared her story, I was struck by the clarity she moved between past experiences, current realities, and the insights she carried into her life's work. Her lived experience brings a powerful and personal dimension to her professional role.

Elizabeth's journey with special education began in fourth grade, when she was diagnosed with a learning disability in reading. Though the term "dyslexia" was never formally used on her IEP, she understood that this was the nature of her challenge. She reflected that the label "LD reading" failed to capture the specific and nuanced ways her learning was impacted. I wonder how many students can relate to this same sentiment and are grappling with a misrepresentation of their disability identity. Middle school was especially difficult and was marked by segregation and inflexibility for Elizabeth. "From 4th to 8th grade, everything was more segregated. We had to leave the room during testing, or when work was to be modified" (Initial survey, January 2025). This separation sent a message that students with IEPs were fundamentally different, and the accommodations often felt generic and misaligned. "Another incident of feeling singled out" (Field note, January 2025).

A defining moment occurred in fifth grade when Elizabeth was made to take a modified test intended for students with intellectual disabilities, not because it was appropriate, but because the teacher said she did not have time to read the original test aloud:

> They made me take the same test as the ID [intellectually disabled] kids took because their modified test was read to them by a para. I think that only happened one time. My mom, who was a SpEd teacher, threw a fit. (Initial survey, January 2025)

This moment stayed with her because it erased her identity and misunderstood her needs. The experience planted early seeds for her future advocacy and current cover story.

Place mattered in Elizabeth's story, but so did people—especially her mom. As a special education teacher, Elizabeth's mother was an active force in ensuring that her daughter received appropriate services and learned how to understand and advocate for them. "When I was in the 6th grade, my mom had me attend my IEP meetings. She wanted me to hear the process and understand my goals" (Initial survey, January 2025). I wondered if this was the supportive adult in Elizabeth's story that has been present in the other participants' narratives. By coaching her to use her voice, her mom helped transform IEP meetings into spaces of empowerment. "I am a very open person when it comes to my IEP and my struggles in the education world" (Journal entry, January 2025). While Elizabeth did not always feel confident making decisions, she was still equipped with the skills to ask questions, speak up, and learn through the process. "I didn't like having to make decisions like 'which do you think would help you better?' Because, what if I was wrong?" (Initial survey, January 2025). Elizabeth's secret story began to shine through here: self-conscious of her own needs.

High school was a turning point when Elizabeth was finally allowed to take a reading program, which she had been denied in middle school because of her IEP status. "By

November of my freshman year, I went from reading at a 4th grade level to an 11th grade level! Things really started falling in place then" (Initial survey, January 2025). High school not only offered access to effective interventions but also fostered a culture of inclusion. When I discovered this piece of Elizabeth's story, I jotted down, "How can special education services be so different from school to school in a small rural district?" (Field note, January 2025). Co-teachers were positioned as equal partners, and accommodations were normalized. "In high school, all core and non-core teachers were very accommodating and took extra time to assist us. They did not depend on the SpEd teacher or para to adjust lessons" (Initial survey, January 2025). Supports like skeletal notes on colored paper were provided with ease, based on student requests. "No one questioned us or acted like it was a big deal" (Initial survey, January 2025). This turning point allowed Elizabeth's secret story to reshape. Rather than being a nervous student not wanting to take risks in various accommodations, now she can be confident in exploring all that was available to her.

Despite her progress in high school, Elizabeth's journey into adulthood, was not without its barriers. At her final IEP meeting, a Vocational Rehabilitation representative doubted her ability to succeed in college. She explained, "When I advocated for myself with Voc Rehab, they were dismissive and essentially said I would not be eligible for services WHEN I flunked out of college. Jokes on them. I have three degrees" (Initial survey, January 2025). I was left stunned and impressed when reading this portion of her survey. Stunned that an individual designed to provide support was the complete opposite and impressed by Elizabeth's spunk and determination to prove them wrong. Moments like this fueled her grit and solidified her commitment to dismantling deficit thinking for the next generation of students. Elizabeth shared this story twice, in her initial survey and her interview, indicating

the importance of this piece of her story. A sacred story is shone through as her disability was connected to a deficit, similar to Bryan's.

Now, as a special educator, Elizabeth helps students learn to advocate for themselves in the same way she was taught. She embraces her own cover story as part of her teaching. "Embrace your differences. Learn about disabilities and ask questions. Speak up if something isn't working" (Journal entry, January 2025). Her classroom reflects the inclusive, student-centered philosophy she wished she had earlier in her education. She views her experiences as both a mirror and a map for her students or tools to help them navigate a system not always built with them in mind. Reflecting on her participation in the study, Elizabeth shared, "I liked how the questions were open-ended and gave me a chance to elaborate on my experiences. The interview gave me a chance to look back at my past and see how much I've grown" (Journal entry, January 2025). This sense of reflection, of charting growth across time and through adversity, is central to her story.

Elizabeth's journey is a testament to the long-term impact of early advocacy, informed support, and the right to be heard. Her personal and professional story shows how understanding and honoring students' individuality can lead to transformation, not just in learning, but in identity. As her story continues to unfold, so does her unwavering commitment to helping students find their voices and believe in their potential.

Allison's Story

Allison is a recent high school graduate whose story reveals the challenges and quiet strength that often go unseen in traditional classrooms. She grew up in a suburban Midwest city and currently lives in a similar setting. I had the privilege of getting to know Allison during high school. Her story is layered and deeply personal, shaped by her journey with

anxiety and her completion of sophomore year through homebound services. As we spoke, she reflected on the complexity of her educational path; one marked by mental health challenges, meaningful relationships, and moments of hard-earned growth.

Allison's experience with special education began halfway through her freshman year when a formal plan was developed to support her mental health needs in the academic setting. Though she initially confused the terminology, wondering whether she had an IEP or a 504 plan, she clearly understood the intent behind the supports: to ensure that students who need help to access learning are given that help with equity in mind. Her early meetings involved her mother and school counselor, where both her academic needs and mental health were discussed. Her involvement in these early meetings was limited as she expresses a sacred story of silence being a safer option. Eventually, it was decided that homebound services, provided at a local library, would be the most effective way for her to reengage and continue making progress.

In high school, Allison described herself as a quiet, shy student with a small, rotating circle of friends. Social dynamics were often unpredictable, shaped in part by her internal experience of anxiety and depression, a piece of her story she tried to keep secret. She noted that major triggers were test-taking, timed tasks, and public speaking. These were not just uncomfortable moments; they often escalated into full-blown panic attacks. "High school was not all sunshine and rainbows, nor was it all dark and gloomy. This interview helped me look at both sides instead of one or the other" (Journal entry, January 2025). This duality was present throughout our conversation as she acknowledged the complex parts and recognized the growth.

As mentioned, Allison completed her sophomore year through homebound services. One defining moment Allison shared occurred during a panic attack she experienced during a school-related activity in the public library. **“**My [homebound] teacher and I were working in a library, I was suffering from a panic attack and wanted to leave. She helped me relax enough to get some work done and settle down before my mom came back” (Initial survey, January 2025). I recognized that “this was not just about getting through an assignment, it was a moment where someone truly saw her and responded with care” (Field note, January 2025). “I remember having a really, really difficult day until my teacher helped me understand that I was in a safe place” (Initial survey, January 2025). Reflecting on this during our interview brought up a wave of emotion for Allison, but sharing the memory seemed to provide her some relief as she was getting to share a piece of her secret story.

Though Allison often felt like her voice was quiet or even absent early in her high school experience, some key people helped create space for it to emerge. “My biggest challenge with utilizing my voice was finding it in the first place. I had conditioned myself to stay silent and put up with everything, until I learned that it wasn’t healthy” (Initial survey, January 2025). Allison’s homebound teacher, in particular, played a powerful role in supporting her agency and well-being. “She [her homebound teacher] made sure that I was always as comfortable as possible. She also understood my struggles and voiced my concerns to my mom when I had trouble speaking up” (Initial survey, January 2025). When I read this sentiment in her survey, I quickly jotted down, “another supportive adult making a difference in the learning for these students with disabilities” (Field note, January 2025). These supportive actions, both seen and unseen, helped Allison begin to advocate for herself in small, meaningful ways.

In terms of place, Allison's learning differed greatly from her peers. While many students experience school through a rotating schedule of classrooms, teachers, and co-teachers, Allison spent much of her sophomore year learning from a public library. She completed assignments through the support of a homebound teacher who helped bridge communication between her and her classroom teachers. While this transition offered a quieter environment, it also highlighted the degree to which school buildings can be stressful and dysregulating for students navigating mental health concerns. After returning briefly to a general education setting, it became clear that an alternative graduation program would better support her in reaching her goals on time and with her mental health intact. Her cover story quickly became one of seeming incapable of finding success in a traditional classroom.

Throughout her high school career, Allison's journey reflected a tension between adult-led decisions and moments of personal agency. She credits her mom as the primary advocate in her educational planning, but with time, Allison began making more of her own decisions, especially in naming her boundaries and limits. She accessed accommodations such as flexible test timing, options for private presentations, and adjusted expectations in emotionally intense situations. Still, she noted inconsistencies in how teachers responded to anxiety. "Some were really good at it. Others just pushed the issue away" (Interview, January 2025). This inconsistency contributed to her belief that more mental health training is needed for educators. "I would love to see an increase of training in the mental health field for educators" (Journal entry, January 2025). When asked to reflect on what she had learned through her experience in special education, Allison responded with a grounded perspective: "Resilience is key. This won't last forever" (Journal entry, January 2025). She emphasized that education is not just about coursework; it is also about learning to navigate life. For

Allison, resilience was not simply enduring stress or difficulty; it was finding the strength to advocate for herself, to recognize safe people and places, and to keep showing up, even when it was hard.

As I reflect on Allison's narrative, I am reminded of the quiet bravery it takes to live through and speak honestly about mental health challenges in high school. Her story is about more than accommodations or programs; it's about becoming visible, finding a voice, and trusting the people who earn that trust. In sharing her story, I am honored to amplify a voice that once felt silent but now carries a clear and thoughtful strength. Her journey shows us that growth often begins in the smallest moments and that with the right support, even the most anxious places can become safe enough to heal.

Sarah's Story

Sarah is a college student attending school in a Midwest suburban city and the same city where she grew up. Her story reveals a thoughtful, observant young woman whose relationship with special education evolved over time and experience. Through our conversation, Sarah reflected on how she came to understand, question, and ultimately embrace the support around her. "I really enjoyed high school" she shared, "so getting to go back and talk about how good I had it really made me grateful" (Journal entry, January 2025). That gratitude is deeply rooted in the relationships, resources, and resilient mindset she developed throughout her journey.

Sarah's experience with special education began in elementary school, although, at the time, she did not fully understand what it meant. "This seems to be a common statement from several participants" (Field note, January 2025). Much of her early educational experience was shaped by her enrollment in both IEP services and ELL (English Language

Learner) classes. “When I first started elementary school, I was put in a class called ELL” she recalled, “my parents are not from the United States and the school I went to thought I didn’t know English” (Initial survey, December 2024). She described herself as a shy child who rarely spoke (her current cover story), something familiar for many young children. However, because of her family background, those quiet tendencies were interpreted as a language barrier. I wondered what testing was conducted for Sarah during this time to allow the adults making these decisions to determine she needed both kinds of services. Similar to Allison’s story, Sarah’s preference for silence indicates her sacred story of that being the safer option than speaking up for her abilities. “I think throughout elementary school I thought ELL and IEP were the same because they literally made me do the same thing in both classes” (Initial survey, December 2024). That lack of clarity and limited family understanding of the education system left Sarah feeling confused and isolated at times – “AGAIN! Singled out” (Field note, January 2025). “My parents really couldn’t understand, and I was their first child, so I was just as lost as them” (Initial survey, December 2024). She remembered being pulled from regular classes without explanation and missing subjects like history and science due to schedule conflicts caused by support classes:

> Some challenges I have faced were not being able to understand why I had to leave my ‘regular’ classes…and how hard it was to explain why I had to leave classes with my friends just to be put in the exact same class but with other kids. (Initial survey, December 2024)

Despite these challenges, Sarah found comfort in the familiar faces around her. She was often with the same classmates, many of whom were also navigating similar support systems. “We were going through the same thing, basically” she said (Interview, January 2025). Those relationships offered her a sense of community and helped her emerge from her shell.

By high school, Sarah's relationship with special education began to shift. For one, she began to understand the purpose and value of her IEP. Extended time on tests, additional academic support, and co-teacher classrooms made a real difference in her learning. "One positive thing I have to say about having an IEP is that when it came to tests, I could take my time and really think about what I had to do" (Initial survey, December 2924). More importantly, Sarah began participating actively in her own IEP meetings. "Yes, in my IEP meeting I did get to talk, especially for the help that I needed" (Interview, January 2025), she said. By junior year, her father started deferring more decisions to her. "He left most of the decisions to me" (Initial survey, December 2024). This marked a key turning point, from being spoken about to being spoken with as her cover story began to shift.

She also began to recognize the power of consistent adult relationships. While her IEP case managers often changed, some support staff remained familiar throughout her high school years:

> I love having two-teacher classes. When the main teacher was being occupied with other students, having an assistant teacher mostly there for students like me helped so much. Some of the assistant teachers were the same ones in most of my classes since freshman year, and I knew if there was anything I needed, I could go to them. (Initial survey, December 2024).

One of the most meaningful relationships emerged through a college readiness program: AVID. Sarah joined AVID as a junior, but it was during her senior year, after being dismissed from special education, that AVID became essential. "AVID was just really there as like my safe spot" (Interview, January 2025) she recalled. Without a formal IEP or caseworker, AVID provided the academic structure and emotional stability she needed to finish strong. "Because of my IEP and my support team [AVID], I picked a college that best fit me" (Journal entry, January 2025). That sense of self-determination was hard-earned and deeply affirming. Now

in college, Sarah no longer has an IEP, but she sees similarities in the support systems offered. The most significant change is that she now navigates them independently. Hearing this made me feel so proud of all the progress she has made across her educational journey. Her high school experience gave her the confidence to self-advocate and take ownership of her learning.

When asked about the most important skill for life after high school, she did not hesitate to say, "a really good work ethic. Even though you fall behind, you really just have to be calm and try to go back up step by step and reach out for help" (Interview, January 2025). In her journal, Sarah returned to the topic of self-advocacy, not just for herself, but for others too. "Helping younger kids understand that in the end everyone will finish just like you—even if the path you take might not be the same. Use that support team you have! Ask for help" (Journal entry, January 2025). She also reflected on a moment of uncertainty during our interview: "I think the only difficult question was, 'What does a good IEP kid look like?' I didn't really know how to answer that because everyone that has an IEP is different in their own way" (Journal entry, January 2025). That statement captures the heart of Sarah's secret story. There is no single way to define a successful student with an IEP because her experience with special education was constantly shifting. Success looks different for everyone, and honoring that difference is essential.

As I reflect on Sarah's narrative, I am struck by the quiet strength it takes to learn how to lead your own story, especially within systems that are not always clear or inclusive. Her experience reminds us that true inclusion is not just about being physically present in a classroom, it is about having a seat at the table, a voice in the decisions, and confidence in one's path. Sarah's story is a testament to informed participation, trusted relationships, and

self-advocacy's slow, steady emergence. It is about showing up with curiosity, courage, and the belief that every step forward is worth taking.

Summary

The secret, sacred, and cover stories shared within the eight narratives above offer firsthand insights into the lived experiences of each participant. While diverse in background and perspective, these stories collectively illuminate resilience, determination, and transformation patterns over time. Together, they deepen our understanding of the individual contexts of each participant and reveal broader social and educational dynamics at play throughout their stories. The initial findings from these narratives underscore a critical need to reevaluate educational mindsets and practices that perpetuate deficit thinking, particularly within special education (Wormeli, 2018). There are critiques of the widespread reliance on grit and growth mindset frameworks, pointing out how they often mask more profound systemic inequities by framing student success as a matter of personal character rather than access and opportunity. When marginalized students fail to conform to dominant, white, middle-class norms of perseverance, they are too often seen as lacking discipline or maturity rather than being underserved by inequitable systems and environments. Too much reliance on a grit mindset results in "requiring the most marginalized learners to put in the most work, and encouraging people to adapt to broken systems instead of questioning them" (Tewell, 2020, p. 138). Further, this deficit framing results in schools attempting to "fix" students instead of confronting the structural issues that hinder their success. The student narratives in this study reveal how these deficit ideologies surface subtly in special education policy and practice, often silencing student voices and reinforcing adult-dominated decision-making. As educators, we must be careful with how we use a grit mindset to actively work against the

systems of oppression seen within these narratives. With these narratives as a foundation, the following section explores the themes that emerged across the data. A more focused discussion of how these experiences connect to and address the research questions follows.

Themes in the Research Questions

Before discussing the themes generated through this narrative inquiry, the Mount Spededemic metaphor detailed in the theoretical framework and Chapter 2 must be revisited to see how these themes build and address the research questions. Mount Spededemic serves as a metaphor to illustrate the complex challenges students with disabilities face in navigating the special education process. The mountain has four distinct layers representing key barriers: *systemic power structures*, depicted as boulders, symbolize the historical and ongoing power imbalances that marginalize students; *staff stigmas and stereotypes*, represented by trees, reflect the implicit biases held by educators that hinder student's voice; *students' identity development*, visualized as fog, captures the internalized psychological threats that cloud students' self-advocacy; and *solutions for the Spededemic*, represented by trail guides, signify the role of school leaders in addressing these inequities and amplifying student voice. The goal is for students to reach the summit of Mount Spededemic, where they can demand the education that is rightfully theirs despite the obstacles encountered along the journey.

Table 4

Summary of Themes

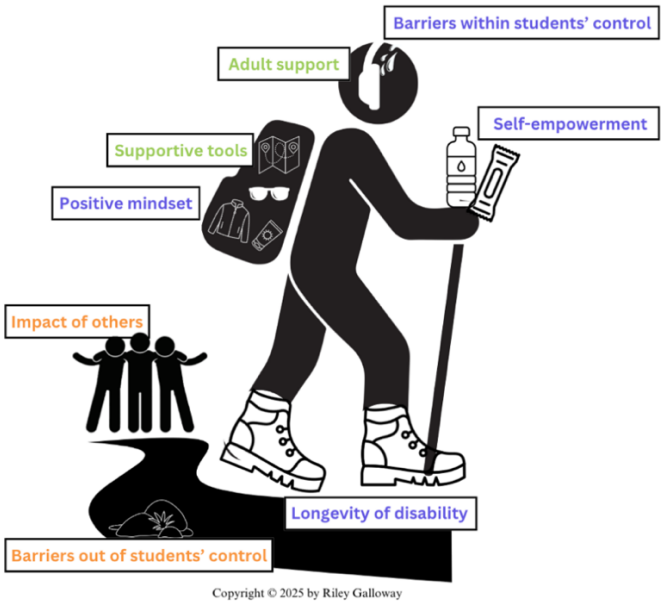
Interpretive Codes	Participants								Sub-question
	Conrad	Billy	Koa	Eretria	Bryan	Elizabeth	Allison	Sarah	
Fueling the Climb (277)									
Positive Mindsets (83)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Self-empowerment (97)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Longevity of disability (27)	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	1
Barriers within students' control (70)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
External Terrain (124)									
Barriers outside of students' control (98)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	2
Impact of others (26)		X		X		X	X	X	
Navigational Aids (206)									
Adult Support (96)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	3
Supportive Tools (110)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	

Findings – Stories and Themes

Building upon the Mount Spededemic metaphor, each theme represents items or mindsets that students with disabilities need to have or will encounter on their trek to the top of the mountain. These themes were developed directly from the participant stories gathered through their three-dimensional narratives. As seen in Table 4 above, each theme was seen within the narrative of every single participant, even if to a small degree. While each participant's story is unique, the similarities have allowed these themes to be closely intertwined. The themes, depicted below in Figure 3 are: (1) *fueling the climb* consisting of interpretive codes that represent the students' backpack, nutrition, personal endurance, and hiking shoes; (2) *external terrain* consisting of issues with the trail and additional hikers; and (3) *navigational aids* consisting of audio guides and necessary hiking supplies.

Figure 3

Necessities for the hiker



Fueling the Climb

The first theme, evident across all participants, emerged from the interpretive codes of *positive mindsets*, *self-empowerment*, *barriers within students' control*, and *longevity of disability*. Each of these interpretive codes appeared at least once across participants, except for the longevity of disability, which was missing from one participant. Together, they highlight the internal necessities that students with disabilities must develop to fuel their climb toward success on Mount Spededemic. Each interpretive code within this theme corresponds to an essential tool that aids students in their journey up the mountain. A *positive mindset* is the backpack, allowing students to carry the necessary resources for their climb. As they navigate their disability identity—dodging obstacles like trees and pressing forward through dense fog—they require sustenance, represented by food and water, to sustain their progress toward *self-empowerment*. Personal endurance is also essential, enabling students to push through the *barriers within their control*. Finally, the *longevity of disability*, as reflected in their continued recognition of learning struggles, requires durable hiking boots—ensuring they are equipped for the long journey ahead.

To begin, the need for a positive mindset was recognized through 83 different instances across all participants' narratives. The most prevalent instances of this interpretive code were seen within Billy's story – a 31-year-old with a reading disability who grew up with two educators as parents and participated in a rigorous academic program in high school. During the interview, he expressed:

> You got to find that motivation to be like, all right, how can I help myself learn? To like get up to the level and make it look like you're not struggling as much. To try to figure out how to get up to the level and really just put in the work. (Interview, December 2024)

This made me think about how having the right mindset can make all the difference in finding success when grappling with learning challenges. His additional statement, “The plan's [IEP] never going to work if you don't take the plan seriously” (Interview, December 2024) which emphasizes even further the importance of internal commitment and perspective.

A similar sentiment was seen within Sarah’s story – a recent high school graduate, currently in college, who has a reading disability as well. During our conversation about what students with disabilities need to be successful, Sarah expressed the need for:

> having a really good work ethic. Because it's like if you don't … you're going to fall behind. And you have to keep up, even though you fall behind, you really just have to be calm and just try to like go back up step by step and reach out for help. (Interview, January 2025).

I saw this thought from Sarah similar to Billy’s as holding on to the right mindset to persevere and continue to work hard to remain optimistic. A difference here, but still within the realm of a positive mindset is the idea of reaching out for help when needed. Conrad – a 22-year-old currently in the workforce – acknowledged the need for the same mindset when he said it was key for him to “be able to advocate for myself and also being aware when I need to ask for help and stuff like that” (Interview, December 2024). Similarly, Koa – a 31-year-old currently in the workforce – stressed the importance of holding onto a positive mindset when dealing with learning disabilities when he said, “Over time, it’s just maturing and realizing, I mean, I do learn in a different way, but no, I’m not dumb” (Interview, December 2024). Finally, Allison – a 23-year-old currently in the workforce – felt “the most important skill to learn would probably be resilience. Just not wanting to give up, just keep pushing forward” (Interview, January 2025). Holding onto a positive mindset when struggling in school was seen to make a difference in each participant’s story.

Like a backpack on a strenuous hike, a positive mindset is the foundation for carrying the tools necessary for success. Without it, students may struggle to gather and hold onto the strategies and support they need along the way. A well-structured backpack, ready to be filled with the supportive tools to be discussed in a later theme, ensures students have what they need to endure obstacles, adapt to challenges, and persist toward their goals. The participant stories shared above highlight how actively cultivating a growth-oriented mindset allows students to "carry" their learning journey forward rather than being weighed down by self-doubt or external difficulties.

Within this same theme of fueling the climb and providing the foundation students with disabilities need for the hike of Mount Spededemic lies a second interpretive code of self-empowerment. Seen through the participant narratives, students with disabilities need to acknowledge that they have learning needs and need support, opportunities for active involvement, and opportunities to voice their needs. Through another close look at the participants' narratives, it will become clear that having those three pieces in their story gives them the nutrition they need to successfully climb Mount Spedemic.

Much like food and water are essential for sustaining a hiker's strength, self-empowerment nourishes students' ability to persist, advocate, and take ownership of their learning experiences. The participants' narratives reflect how opportunities to participate in their education decision-making process provided them with the necessary internal fuel to find success and feel heard. Conrad described the shift in his educational experience when teachers began allowing him to advocate for himself:

> I didn't really feel like I benefited from it [an IEP] until I was probably in middle school and high school more so…Because they [teachers] actually kind of started allowing me to speak up and advocate for myself with my education plans and stuff. (Interview, December 2024).

This moment signifies how active participation in educational planning allowed him to see the benefits of his IEP that would provide him with the sustenance needed to grow in his learning. Similarly, Elizabeth – a 29-year-old teacher diagnosed with dyslexia early in her educational journey – emphasized how students were encouraged to engage in their meetings within the district she grew up in, stating, "the kids were always very involved in their meetings and like how to how to make things like better for themselves. We had to go in with like this is what's working for me" (Initial survey, January 2025). By identifying their needs and vocalizing their experiences, students were not just receiving accommodations but actively fueling their own success. This process of self-empowerment can be compared to a hiker choosing the proper nourishment to maintain their strength on the trail, ensuring they have the energy to push forward and continue their trek to the top of Mount Spededemic.

Sarah and Bryan's reflections further illustrate how understanding one's needs and recognizing the value of support contributes to self-empowerment. A unique piece of Sarah's story was that she exhibited enough progress on her goals to be dismissed from an IEP her senior year of high school, however, she acknowledged that the "whole thing [IEP] really just helped me with like certain things in high school mostly" (Journal entry, January 2025). Bryan – an 18-year-old still in school – on the other hand, admitted his struggle with this acknowledgment when he said, "I don't honestly think I need an IEP, but sometimes I do. Because sometimes I do have a hard time understanding the working class" (Interview, January 2025). Even in moments of uncertainty, as seen in Bryan's statement, there is still a sliver of acknowledgment that having access to support through an IEP can be a source of strength when needed.

Without proper nutrition, a hiker may lose momentum, feel depleted, or struggle to reach their goal. Likewise, students who do not develop self-empowerment may struggle to advocate for themselves or make meaningful progress in their learning. Just as a climber must be mindful of their energy intake to keep moving forward, students must cultivate and sustain self-empowerment as an ongoing source of fuel to navigate the challenges of their educational journey up Mount Spededemic.

However, just as proper nutrition would not be enough for a treacherous mountain climb, a hiker relies on durable boots to navigate rough and unpredictable terrain. Through the interviews and narratives collected, it was seen that students' disabilities do not simply disappear with an effective IEP; there was a sense of longevity of their disability that cannot be ignored. Students with disabilities must equip themselves with long-term strategies and resilience to manage ongoing challenges, like ensuring hiking boots remain sturdy and well-maintained for the journey ahead.

Conrad described how his struggle to ask for help has not disappeared over time but remains a challenge when he said, "it's something that I sometimes struggle with still to this day because I would rather try to get something figured out by myself. And then I tend not to ask for help. So it's something I still struggle with" (Interview, December 2024) when referring to his learning disability. This illustrates how, even as students gain independence, balancing self-sufficiency with seeking support remains an ongoing challenge. Similarly, Elizabeth reinforced this idea, noting, "It's a skill I have to always practice on" (Journal entry, January 2025) when discussing the daily demands of her teaching job and the reading she has to do daily. She often relies on the reading strategies taught to her throughout her educational journey. However, she did mention that she had not had to ask for accommodations in the

workplace and was grateful for that fact. This portion of our conversation highlights that self-advocacy and coping strategies are not one-time solutions but require ongoing effort, much like a hiker breaking in and maintaining their boots to ensure they provide long-term support.

This idea of the longevity of a disability was seen in all but one participant's story but was more prevalent within Conrad's, Elizabeth's, and Sarah's story. Sarah's perspective shows how her journey shifted from structured supports to independently seeking resources, as again, she was dismissed from an IEP her senior year of high school, yet the need for assistance has not disappeared:

> I'm doing college without anything [accommodations] but here I get a lot of support. And you have a lot of things that you can access that is kind of like IEP [services] so it's like I don't really need a program to actually go get the services I need. (Initial survey, December 2024).

Her experience highlights how even though she did not continue to receive the accommodations she was used to in high school, she still had learning challenges to cope with and was able to rely on external structures to find ways to support herself. The only participant whose story that did not express this interpretive code was Bryan. However, he did express the need for a break while dealing with the strenuous climb saying, "Other times I'm just lying there with my head down" (Interview, January 2025). This piece of his story alludes to the need for a rest stop along the climb when they are unequipped with sturdy hiking boots.

As seen through these pieces of narratives, there is a long road ahead for students with disabilities, even beyond graduating high school. Hiking boots need to support the longevity of their disability and must be durable enough to last the entire journey. Students with disabilities must build long-term strategies to persist beyond school settings and into adulthood, ensuring they can navigate challenges with resilience and adaptability. Without

sturdy boots, a hiker risks injury or slowing down; students may find their journey unnecessarily difficult without sustained coping mechanisms. By recognizing the longevity of their disabilities and the need for ongoing self-advocacy, students ensure they are even more equipped for the whole climb up Mount Spededemic.

Finally, a less physical comparison lies within this theme of *fueling the climb*. There are barriers within students' control that those hiking Mount Spededemic need the *personal endurance* to navigate. This personal endurance is represented in Figure 3 above with the sweat droplets on the hiker's forehead. These barriers create this need for personal endurance, which results from mindsets or decisions the students make that actively work against their ability to find success. This was seen most prevalent within Billy's story as he referenced a mindset that he recognized he was actively working against since being diagnosed with a reading disability in elementary school. When reflecting on his educational journey, he expressed the thought, "I was never good," on multiple occasions. He also said, "I felt like I was almost like dumb because I couldn't do it like everybody else or figure it out like everybody else right off the bat" (Interview, December 2024). It became clear when gathering his story that he had to actively work against this mindset for most of his educational journey, which would require much personal endurance.

Contrary to a fixed mindset seen with Billy, other participants drew attention to actively working against what was being accommodated and modified for their learning needs. Elizabeth recounted, "I never used them. I had them, but didn't use them" (Interview, January 2025) when discussing specific accommodations offered later in high school. Elizabeth chose not to utilize certain accommodations when she did not feel like she needed them. Making this choice was in her control and could have caused unintended learning

challenges. Other participants, like Bryan, would actively work against the support provided to him in his classes by "laying there with [his] head down" (Interview, January 2025). Again, Bryan chose to jeopardize his success in the classroom. These kinds of choices required both Elizabeth and Bryan to work harder to act against these choices they were making and continue their trek up Mount Spededemic towards finding their voice.

Each of the interpretive codes discussed in this section that worked together to build the theme of *Fueling the Climb,* was within the realm of the students' control. It was seen that students with disabilities need positive mindsets or a backpack to hold their supplies, self-empowerment or the proper nutrition to maintain their energy, the skills to deal with the longevity of their disability or durable hiking boots for the climb, and the personal endurance to keep going and work past the barriers that are within their control. The next theme deals with pieces seen within the participants' stories that are outside their control and within the external terrain of the path to the top of Mount Spededemic.

External Terrain

The next theme seen throughout the participants' stories is derived from two interpretive codes. First, barriers out of students' control are represented within Figure 3 as loose rocks along the path. These barriers were seen through discussions of their educational struggles, feelings of being singled out, and various adult created barriers through actions of silencing and decisions made for the students. These barriers do not keep students from moving forward on their hike but may cause stumbling along the way. Second, the impact of others represented by additional hikers along the trail. This interpretive code was only seen within five of the participants' stories. It came from recalling being bullied or accepted by other students and comparing their needs to other students' needs.

Many references to barriers outside students' control revolved around the adults in their educational journey. For instance, Conrad described how his behavioral outbursts, an educational struggle, led to his removal from school rather than efforts to address his needs: "when I was younger, I had outbursts and then when an outburst would happen, they're [teachers and administrators] would be like okay we're done. And then send me off to a different school" (Interview, December 2024). Similarly, Eretria recalled the discouragement she faced from a teacher who diminished her academic potential, stating, "I had a teacher one time tell me D stands for diploma. So she didn't want me there [in class] no more" (Interview, January 2025). This external discouragement, rather than support, created additional barriers for students to stumble over along their hike.

Many participants also highlighted how decisions were often made for them rather than with them, limiting their sense of agency and creating a barrier to navigate. Koa reflected on the lack of transparency in their academic support, explaining, "My mom and the teachers were mainly the ones kind of like doing so behind the scenes and I didn't really know exactly what was going on" (Interview, December 2024). Likewise, Eretria described her experience in meetings regarding her education, where she felt like a passive participant rather than an active voice in her own learning plan: "Mostly told, mostly told. I mean, I guess I was sitting in on the meetings, but I didn't really have a say…basically, my case manager would be there but [I] kind of just sat there" (Interview, January 2025). This echoes Allison's sentiment when she said, "I feel like I could have been asked more about my input" (Interview, January 2025). These experiences illustrate how adult-driven decision-making, rather than collaboration, contributed to the feeling of navigating the hike with uncertain

footing, as students were forced to adjust to decisions made on their behalf rather than having the opportunity to advocate for their own needs.

Some participants recounted moments of dismissal or judgment from educators, such as Elizabeth, who recalled a teacher saying, “When you inevitably like flunk out, we may not be there for you, but here's my card anyway” (Initial survey, January 2025). This was during her post-secondary transition meeting, during which she was supposed to be given an array of support to aid her success in college, but instead, she was met with disbelief that she would find that success. Other participants described being confused about their experiences due to a lack of communication about their accommodations. Sarah recalled, “I was like just confused mostly because…I was just being taken out of classes and not having certain classes that other students [had]” (Interview, January 2025). This confusion may have jeopardized her journey towards success. These experiences illustrate how structural and social barriers created additional difficulties along the climb, reinforcing the need for resilience and self-advocacy to continue progressing toward their goals and push past these barriers outside of their control.

In addition to these adult-created barriers, students encountered systemic challenges in the classroom, ultimately stemming from their learning disabilities, which were also out of their control. Billy described struggling to retain information in traditional lecture-based settings, sharing that “there are some classes I would struggle with uh, like, retaining the information. If it was just like the teacher was up there lecturing and like it was hard to keep up” (Interview, December 2024). Similarly, Koa expressed frustration with the expectation to match the pace of their peers, stating, “It was always a struggle for me to really understand and learn at the same pace as everybody else” (Interview, December 2024). As Eretria

pointed out, large class sizes also contributed to these difficulties, “The teacher didn’t have like…enough time with all like 30 of her students to help you out” (Interview, January 2025). Again, these pieces of the participants’ narratives illustrate the idea of students with disabilities needing to be prepared for the loose rocks they may encounter along their hike on Mount Spededemic. Within the first theme discussed, students with disabilities must have several tools to support their climb, and at the same time, these tools would support navigating these barriers that are out of their control.

Further, adding to these barriers outside of students’ control and creating issues with the external terrain, students also encountered other hikers on the trail and had to deal with this impact of others to ensure their trek to the top of Mount Spededemic was not interrupted. As mentioned, this interpretive code was only seen in five participants’ stories but was especially prevalent within Billy’s. He reflected on the difficulty of recognizing his academic struggles in comparison to his peers:

> It's always tough whenever you realize that you don't…Like you’re having more, more trouble learning than like the kids next to you and the kids sitting at your table or in your row or around you and that's…It's tough to admit that. (Interview, December 2024)

This feeling of comparison to others added an emotional layer to the climb, reinforcing the challenge of self-acceptance within the educational environment. However, Billy also noted the positive impact of others, explaining that “it can come from others. Your friends help when they are like ‘Hey, dude, you need any help?’” (Interview, December 2024). Supportive peers served as an essential part of the journey, offering assistance when the climb became too steep to navigate alone.

For some, social interactions presented additional challenges along the trail. Eretria, for example, recalled a sense of isolation, stating, “I didn't really interact with any of the

students in my grade" (Interview, January 2025). This lack of social connection added another dimension to the barriers she faced, making the educational path feel even more solitary. Similarly, Allison described how maintaining friendships felt unstable, remarking, "I found myself going through friendships quite a bit. So that was how I kind of viewed friendships in high school was that it was kind of like a revolving door a little bit" (Initial survey, January 2025). The unpredictability of friendships created a dynamic where social support was not always a reliable part of the journey but still a layer to cope with.

On the other hand, some participants found solidarity in shared experiences. Sarah explained how forming bonds with others who understood her struggles helped ease communication and provided a sense of belonging:

> And so, I really just became close with them [students in her classes] and they were like, they would help me also with communication because I would just talk to them because we really just knew each other. And we got each other. We were going through like the same thing, basically. (Interview, January 2025)

In contrast, Billy recognized the challenge of developing essential social skills, stating, "just developing the skill of just being a good listener, which I think a lot of people struggle with just with listening and understanding other people's point of view" (Journal entry, December 2024). These insights reflect the complexity of navigating relationships climbing; some interactions served as sources of encouragement and support, while others highlighted feelings of disconnection. Ultimately, the impact of others played a crucial role in shaping the participants' experiences, influencing their sense of self, academic journey, and emotional well-being. Whether through comparisons, social struggles, or moments of support, the presence of others on the trail influenced how smoothly or unevenly the path unfolded for each student.

While students with disabilities deal with the components of the external terrain, the items that fuel their climb provide them with support to continue climbing. The final layer that will be discussed is the navigational aids that round out the support students with disabilities need to reach the top of Mount Spededemic.

Navigational Aids

Even though this theme is being discussed last, it should not be viewed as any less important than the previous two. After initially collecting data, this is the first theme that became apparent within the analysis process. Similar to the previous theme, this one was also derived from two interpretive codes: *adult support* and *supportive tools*. Through the discussion below, adult support will be connected to using an audio guide, and supportive tools will be seen as necessary items within their backpacks, such as sunscreen, sunglasses, a raincoat, or a map. Hearing pieces of the participants' stories once more will illuminate the need for these navigational aids to allow students with disabilities to support their climb and ultimately find their voice.

While collecting and analyzing the data, the interpretive code of *adult support* was the first that became apparent. Interview after interview revealed that having a specific adult in their educational life supporting their learning was key to their success. These adults ranged from IEP case managers to specific content teachers to coaches. It did not seem to matter who the adult was, if they felt the support. Billy reflected on his eighth-grade English teacher, reporting that it was "the only time I ever enjoyed English class…her name was Ms. M and she taught differently" (Interview, December 2024). With having a reading disability, having Ms. M as an English teacher was a turning point for Billy and gave him the encouragement he needed to enroll in a more academically rigorous program in high school.

Koa had a similar experience with his third-grade teacher, recalling that his "third-grade teacher was the most helpful with any of it [IEP supports]. He was the one who was most willing to help me understand and learn in a different way" (Interview, December 2024). Both of these two participants referenced the support they felt from a specific teacher because they taught differently, and while I cannot speak for these participants, I would relate the support they felt to having an encouraging podcast at each step of their climb.

Participants' IEP case managers also played a key role in their educational journeys. For Conrad, his high school case manager would ensure he was involved in his IEP meetings. He said, "The case manager at those times would always kind of seem to care about my best interest. And then would also help advise me on stuff" (Interview, December 2024). Similarly, Eretria recalled, "I go to my case manager's office at any time during the day or shoot or an email or whatever" (Interview, December 2024). Both participants were seen to have ongoing and consistent support from their case managers, which ultimately led to more opportunities for them to use their voices throughout their educational journeys. Sarah had a unique experience where she had a different case manager each year of high school due to various things out of her control. However, she recalled, "Most of my caseworkers ended up being my teacher" (Initial survey, December 2024). which allowed her to continue to feel their support even when they were not directly in charge of implementing her IEP.

An additional piece of adult support that contributes to this theme comes from familial support. Two participants, Billy and Elizabeth, had a unique layer of support in their family, as their parents were educators. Billy expressed "Parent involvement was also important in that [IEP] process, especially as a child with two principal parents. They were always heavily involved and like kept on top of it" (Interview, December 2024). Likewise,

Elizabeth reflected on how her mom was a special education teacher when she expressed, “I've kind of had like that coaching of what to say and how to say it, which helped” (Interview, January 2025), referring to her participation in her IEP meetings. The family support for both participants gave them a unique voice in their IEP meetings as they were aware of their rights and could articulate their needs. Regardless of the kind of adult support the participants had through their educational journeys, guiding their trek in the form of an audio guide or a supportive podcast, I think Elizabeth said it best when she said, “I think kids need to either talk like with just like either their parents, a teacher they trust” (Interview, January 2025).

Supplementing the adult support within this theme of navigational aids is the interpretive code *supportive tools*. These supportive tools are seen within the metaphor as items within the hiker’s backpacks that provide support for the long trek up Mount Spededemic. For many participants, these tools as accommodations that allowed them to navigate academic challenges more effectively. Conrad, for example, described how specific supports helped him overcome difficulties with reading:

> I struggle with reading, so I would be able to have tests read to me and stuff like that so I could understand it in a different way or even if I don't get an assignment, I got a little extra time to figure it out and stuff like that. (Interview, December 2024)

Similarly, Elizabeth highlighted the role of accessible materials, explaining, “I had access to more digital textbooks and stuff like that” (Interview, January 2025), illustrating how technology played a crucial role in supporting her learning.

For some students, these tools also included structured self-reflection and progress monitoring opportunities. Billy emphasized the importance of IEP meetings as a means of adjusting support as needed:

> Those [IEP meetings] were the opportunities to say, 'hey, this is working, and this isn't' and um…They show or see if I'm making progress or whatnot. There were IEP meetings that were more to say to check on like progress and see if what they had in place was working and if they had to tweak anything. (Interview, December 2024)

This process ensured that the tools in their metaphorical backpacks remained functional and adaptable throughout their journey. Beyond academic accommodations, having human support systems also played a vital role. Sarah shared how the presence of co-teachers made a significant impact, stating, "I would have assistant teachers [co-teachers] and like they would really… just like having somebody there to help me was like really amazing" (Interview, January 2025) These individuals provided support along the hike, offering direction when the path became difficult to navigate similar to how a map might support. Finally, the concept of *supportive tools* extended beyond structured accommodations to recognizing that success looks different for everyone. Koa encapsulated this idea, saying, "I feel like success is different for everybody" (Journal entry, December 2024), reinforcing the notion that each student required different tools to reach their version of the summit and ultimately finding their voice at the top.

Ultimately, *supportive tools* functioned as critical resources within the participants' metaphorical backpacks, equipping them with the necessary means to navigate the terrain of their educational journeys. Whether through accommodations like extended time and digital resources, structured progress monitoring, or the presence of dedicated support staff, these tools allowed students to persist despite the challenges they faced. However, as seen throughout the participants' stories, the effectiveness of these tools was not uniform.

This theme and the two previous themes, highlight the importance of individualized supports in fostering self-empowerment and success in educational settings. It also underscores the impact of external structures and personal agency in shaping students'

experiences. With these insights in mind, we now turn to an analysis of how the study's research questions are answered within the data, exploring the broader implications of these findings within Chapter 5 and making recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to provide space for students with learning disabilities to share their experiences with special education and highlight their voices through their stories. Through holding this space for my participants and collecting their surveys, interviews, and journal reflections, I am beginning to understand the multifaceted reality that these students lived throughout their K-12 experiences and the tools they carried to climb Mount Spededemic. Although there are barriers to equitable education for this group of students that are out of their control (Kahne et al., 2022; Lalvani, 2015; Liu et al., 2018), the findings of this study can be translated to other students with disabilities to support the finding of their voices and ultimately their academic success. Reading and reflecting upon the participants' stories in the previous chapter provides a deeper understanding of the day-to-day reality for students with disabilities. In this final chapter, I address the implications of the findings through the lens of the research questions and educational leadership. Following that discussion, I provide recommendations for future research and a reflection on my journey as an educational leader during this study.

Answering the Research Questions

One central question guided my study: What are the stories (secret, sacred, and cover) that students in special education narrate about using their voices in their educational experiences? To answer this central question, three sub-questions were crafted that each pinpointed a layer of the students' stories as they navigated using their voices:

- How do students use their voices in educational decision-making conversations?

- What are students' most significant challenges in utilizing their voices in the IEP process?
- What do students have to say about the support they need to have a voice in their educational experiences?

Through the analysis of the themes found within the participant data discussed in Chapter 4, it was seen that each sub-question was answered within one of those themes, outlined in Table 4 and more concisely displayed in Table 5 below. The color coding of Table 5 correlates with the colors used in Figure 3. Each question was examined through the initial surveys, interviews, and journal reflections collected from each of the eight participants. First, I will answer the sub-questions and then address the central research question.

Table 5

Research Questions

Theme	Sub-question Answered
Feuling the Climb	1
External Terrain	2
Navigational Aids	3

Sub-Question One: How Do Students Use Their Voices in Educational Decision-Making Conversations?

The first theme, *fueling the climb*, speaks to how students use their voices in educational decision-making conversations by highlighting the role of self-advocacy and personal agency. Quotes from participants illustrated how they navigated these conversations. Sometimes, students feel empowered to speak up about what was working and what was not,

while at other times, they feel their voices were overlooked. This theme also captured moments where students gained the confidence and opportunity to express their needs, provide input in meetings, and advocate for accommodations that best supported their learning. The theme was built from four interpretive codes: 1. Positive Mindsets, held within their backpack, enabling students to carry tools and persist through challenges. 2. Self-empowerment or the sustenance needed to advocate for themselves and take ownership of their education. 3. Longevity of Disability is seen as the durable hiking boots needed to recognize that learning challenges persist into adulthood and require long-term strategies. 4. Barriers Within Students' Control, represented as sweat droplets on the hiker's forehead, are the personal choices and mindsets students must overcome with endurance and reflection.

When students like Conrad and Elizabeth were allowed to participate and share their needs, they began to feel their voices mattered. That empowerment fueled further engagement throughout their high school years and into adulthood. Even when no longer receiving IEP services, students like Sarah found ways to navigate systems independently, still drawing on the internal skills built during her time with formal support. To emphasize the internal push required to speak up, Billy shared, "You got to find that motivation… Really just put in the work" (Interview, December 2024). Similarly, Conrad highlighted how teachers' willingness to let him advocate for himself changed his relationship to learning when he said, "because they [teachers] actually kind of started allowing me to speak up and advocate for myself with my education plans and stuff" (Interview, December 2024). The participants in this study expressed that their ability to contribute meaningfully or self-advocate in IEP meetings emerged from the following:

- Cultivating positive self-perceptions and growth mindsets
- Developing a sense of empowerment to articulate their needs

- Gaining confidence over time in their understanding of their learning challenges
- Learning to balance independence with help-seeking

Students' ability to use their voices in educational decision-making is not just about being given an opportunity; it is about having the skill set needed to take advantage of that opportunity. When students build self-awareness, confidence, and resilience, they are more likely to speak up, advocate, and actively shape their educational path.

These experiences echo Field et al. (2003), who noted the lack of self-advocacy skills in students with disabilities entering postsecondary settings. The current study extends this understanding by showing that students can develop these skills when given space and encouragement. As discussed within the literature review, successfully developing a strong disability identity is a complex process (Erikson, 1968; Gardner-Kitt & Worrell, 2007; Marcia, 1980). During the formative years, not only are students with disabilities grappling with the intersectionality of their identity (Crenshaw, 1989; Settles & Buchanan, 2014), but they also must find time to develop the skills needed to self-advocate for their learning needs. Too often, the conversations surrounding students with disabilities are solely about finding solutions for the difficulties they face in school rather than the importance of how they can develop self-advocacy skills to navigate through their difficulties (Koca et al., 2023).

While systems of support were not always consistent from participant to participant, they each demonstrated a capacity for resilience and self-awareness. Their ability to identify their needs and ask for help, though not universal, was a critical tool for their success in having a voice in educational decision-making conversations. In summary, students used their voices most confidently when they believed in their potential and had models of encouragement. Internal tools of resilience, reflection, and mindsets were essential for their

climb of Mount Spededemic and ultimately using their voices to advocate for their learning needs.

Sub-Question Two: What Are Students' Most Significant Challenges in Utilizing Their Voices in the IEP Process?

Next, the *external terrain* theme answered students' most significant challenges in utilizing their voices in the IEP process. The participants' narratives revealed that students with disabilities encounter numerous barriers to using their voices, many of which are beyond their control. These barriers include the prevalence of adult decision-making in their educational experiences and the ongoing challenges associated with their learning differences. Participants described how adult decisions, lack of communication, and exclusion from planning processes contributed to instability along their path. For instance, Koa explained, "I didn't really know exactly what was going on" (Interview, December 2024) regarding academic decisions, while Eretria shared that she "didn't really have a say" (Interview, January 2025). These quotes reflect how external decision-making created an uncertain footing on their climb. Prior studies have indicated that IEP conversations are often dominated by the adults in charge (Liu et al., 2018). However, it has also been noted that meaningful change is possible when the adults in charge actively support student advocacy within this process (Holquist & Walls, 2021).

Outside of these adult-created barriers were students' challenges when interacting with their peers. Some experienced bullying, like Billy, who recounted that he did not feel accepted by his peers until he was in middle school, while others, like Sarah, focused on comparing their needs to their classmates and felt a sense of togetherness in their struggles. For many, these barriers were compounded by feelings of comparison or social

disconnection. Billy described "having more trouble learning than… the kids sitting at your table" (Interview, December 2024) as a difficult realization. Meanwhile, Allison called friendships a "revolving door" (Initial survey, January 2025), pointing to the lack of stability and support in her peer relationships. There are clearly social dynamics at play within these peer-to-peer relationships that could stem from the negative stereotypes of students with disabilities (Crowson & Brandes, 2014).

These external barriers, like loose rocks on a trail, did not prevent movement but made the hike more treacherous. Despite the instability of the external terrain, students continued to climb, leaning on inner strength and occasional support from others. This sub-question underscores the power dynamics (Anderson & Keys, 2019; Rigby et al., 2020; Tefera et al., 2019) between students and adults in the IEP process and suggests that systemic changes are necessary to foster meaningful student involvement. Additionally, the discussion of the *external terrain* theme highlights how students compare their academic challenges to their peers, shaping their perceptions of ability and self-worth, and stressing the need for inclusive school environments.

Sub-Question Three: What Do Students Have to Say About the Support They Need to Have a Voice in Their Educational Experiences?

Finally, the last theme, *navigational aids*, addresses the support students need to have a voice in their educational experiences. As seen through the discussion of participants' stories above, students with disabilities need at least one specific adult that meets their learning needs and advocates for different teaching styles. It was clear that having an adult they could confide in and trusted allowed them to use their voices and feel heard. Across interviews, participants emphasized the value of adults who did not just occupy positions of

authority but actively listened, adapted their teaching to their learning style, and encouraged them to speak up. These adults, whether IEP case managers, teachers, or coaches, functioned like audio guides during a difficult hike, offering both direction and motivation. Billy recalled how his eighth-grade English teacher, Ms. M, changed his perception of learning by teaching in a way that aligned with his needs as a student with a reading disability. Koa also credited his third-grade teacher as the person "most willing to help [him] understand and learn in a different way" (Interview, December 2024). It is not a new concept that teachers can enhance the quality of instruction through curriculum development and learning experiences (Ahmad & Réhman, 2014; Dirsa et al., 2022; Imam et al., 2020; Saifulloh, 2016). Therefore, these stories reinforced that students feel most empowered when at least one adult takes the time to connect with their learning style and personal goals.

Participants also expressed how consistency in adult support, especially from IEP case managers, was key in helping them have the opportunity to advocate for their learning needs. Conrad shared that his case manager "seemed to care about [his] best interest" (Initial survey, December 2024) and advised him when needed, while Eretria described being able to visit her case manager "at any time during the day" (Initial survey, January 2025). Despite having a different case manager each year, Sarah found a sense of continuity in that most of them were also her teachers. This overlap provided an ongoing connection that helped maintain her voice in IEP meetings. Again, it has been seen within the literature discussed in Chapter 2 that high-quality teacher-student relationships have the power to protect and support students in a way that they can thrive in the learning environment (McNally & Slutsky, 2018). Participants in this study made it clear: they need adults who are available, consistent, and actively involved in creating spaces where their input matters.

Additionally, providing appropriate accommodations and varying the specific support with regard to their individual needs allowed the participants to feel safe enough to use their voices within the IEP process. Participants spoke about the importance of practical tools, including accommodations such as extended time, digital resources, co-teachers, and opportunities for reflection in IEP meetings. Conrad found that having tests read aloud and receiving extra time allowed him to access content more meaningfully (Interview, December 2024). Elizabeth shared that access to digital textbooks made a big difference in how she engaged with her coursework (Interview, January 2025). Billy emphasized that IEP meetings were not just procedural but moments to assess what was working and what needed to change (Interview, December 2024). It would appear obvious that individualized accommodations are necessary for students to succeed in the learning environment as IDEA calls for appropriate accommodations and modifications to access the general education curriculum (Haug, 2016; Huefner, 2000), yet the concept goes much deeper than simply providing. The tools must be flexible and responsive to students' evolving learning needs to empower students to take part in shaping their educational journey.

In the end, participants' stories about the support they needed to effectively use their voices revolved around the need for people who listen and tools that work for their learning needs. Whether through adult mentorship, adaptive accommodations, or meaningful inclusion in their own educational planning, these navigational aids gave participants the confidence and clarity to use their voices and ultimately turned passive educational experiences into shared journeys of agency and self-discovery.

Central Question: What Are the Stories (Secret, Sacred, and Cover) that Students in Special Education Narrate About Using Their Voices in Their Educational Experiences?

For this narrative inquiry, Clandinin and Connelly's (1996) contextualization of secret, sacred, and cover stories was utilized to address the central question. Secret stories are the ones that are more personal and only shared when there is a deep layer of trust. Stories that reveal policy-level "truths" that are rarely questioned but often reinforced through practice are referred to as sacred stories in this context. The stories that are shown on the outside and often mask the more vulnerable pieces are the cover stories. While the cover stories are most easily seen through the narratives, the secret and sacred stories require more in-depth analysis. For this study, the sacred stories were the most challenging to discover as participants did not directly speak about the policy truths they deal with daily, and more inferences had to be made based on their narratives.

Students with disabilities who participated in this study told stories of how they navigate identity, support, and stigma across their educational journeys. While each participant shared unique stories through their three-dimensional data, overlapping messages were shared about what could be learned from their stories. Billy, Elizabeth, and Bryan told stories of seeking belonging and managing differences. Elizabeth, Sarah, and Koa told stories of a shifting identity and developing their voice. Allison, Bryan, and Conrad shared stories of internal struggles that shaped their external perception. All participants shared stories of the power of adult support.

While participants primarily shared their cover stories, it became clear that these public-facing narratives often masked deeper secret stories of vulnerability, struggle, and growth. For many, the contrast between their inner and outer narratives revealed how identity is shaped in response to both internal challenges and external expectations. Conrad's story exemplified this tension as he shared his early experiences of discouragement and isolation in

elementary school led him to retreat inward, constructing a secret story grounded in feelings of being "broken" and disconnected. Yet, his current cover story reflects confidence and advocacy, marking a significant narrative shift from self-protection to self-empowerment. Billy similarly constructed a cover story that allowed him to blend in, driven by a secret story centered on his desire not to appear different. Over time, his narrative evolved into one of self-acceptance, especially as he recognized how social acceptance was not tied to his self-worth. Koa's experience followed a similar trajectory. As a child, he relied heavily on accommodations and adult support to navigate the anxiety that surfaced around learning. His secret story reflected a sense of dependency, while his current cover story highlights his confidence and capability in the workplace.

Additional participants also shared layered narratives that reflect this shift from hidden vulnerability to personal agency. Eretria, for instance, was most successful in smaller learning environments or spaces that allowed her to be fully seen and valued by the adults she trusted. Her secret story speaks to the power of intimacy and connection in educational settings, while her cover story might be misinterpreted as that of a disengaged student avoiding classroom interaction. Bryan's story also reveals a striking contrast as he sometimes projected apathy and disengagement; his secret story reveals a student who deeply desired to succeed but lacked the consistent skill set to do so. Elizabeth's journey reflects the evolution from self-consciousness to self-advocacy. Once hesitant to request accommodations, she now encourages others to "embrace your differences," fully owning her cover story as an empowered educator and advocate. For Allison, anxiety and depression shaped her educational experience in ways often invisible to others. Her cover story, appearing incapable in traditional classrooms, masked an inner world of emotional struggle. Finally, Sarah's

shifting experiences with special education revealed that there is no single blueprint for success. Initially shy and reluctant to speak, her voice gradually emerged as her father encouraged her to make her own decisions, a pivotal moment when her narrative began to shift from one in which others spoke about her to one in which they spoke with her..

On the other hand, sacred stories were more challenging to decipher within the participants' narratives. To discover the sacred stories, I asked myself to consider what deeply held beliefs, assumptions, or truths about special education were revealed through the participants' lived experiences. In this sense, sacred stories are policy-level truths that are rarely questioned and often reinforced. While rarely stated outright, these stories shape the daily experiences of students with disabilities as they navigate educational systems. As participants climbed their metaphorical Mount Spededemic, they encountered moments where these sacred stories surfaced in decisions made for them, supports that felt conditional, and assumptions about their abilities. For instance, the recurring belief that "adults know best" emerged in multiple accounts, where students felt they were present at IEP meetings but not meaningfully included in them. This was seen as Eretria and Allison both described feeling unheard in settings that should have amplified their voices, echoing a system that views student input as optional rather than essential. Similarly, the sacred story that "compliance equals support" was challenged through stories like Sarah's, who noted confusion about accommodations she was given as she did not understand the reasoning but just went along with the support rather than speaking up about her concerns.

Other sacred stories centered more explicitly on how disability itself is framed within educational culture. The narrative of "disability as deficit" was visible in the way participants were often underestimated or made to feel less than their peers. Elizabeth's experience of

being told she would “inevitably flunk out” and Billy’s feelings of isolation reflect how success is too often defined through comparison to general education peers. Further, the story that “support is a privilege, not a right” surfaced in how uneven and inconsistent access to meaningful services felt. While students like Elizabeth and Billy, whose parents were educators, navigated the system more effectively, others, like Sarah and Koa, described moments of serendipitous support. Taken together, these sacred stories illuminate the gaps between the intended promise of special education policy and students’ lived experiences.

Implications and Recommendations for Leadership

This study aimed to discover the stories told by students with disabilities about how they can use their voices in their educational experiences. Their stories illuminated three implications: (1) students value opportunities to engage in educational decisions, particularly during IEP meetings; (2) students often face adult-dominated decision-making and limited agency in the IEP process; and (3) students benefit from having at least one trusted adult advocate. Two recommendations are offered for each implication.

Implication One: Students Value Opportunities to Engage in Educational Decisions, Particularly During IEP Meetings

Traditionally, IEP meetings have been led by the teacher or case manager and provide limited opportunities for students with disabilities to participate (Scheef et al., 2024). Wagner et al. (2012) reported that fewer than half of the students who attended their IEP meetings felt they could contribute even “some input” to the discussion. While there are many possible reasons that students with disabilities are often left out of the conversation, the findings of this study revealed that **s**tudents value opportunities to engage in educational decisions, particularly during IEP meetings. The moment when students felt involved in the process and

an agent in their learning was often a turning point for the participants' narratives. However, without intentional structures, student voices may be inconsistently heard or disregarded (Landmark & Zhang, 2019; Sanderson & Goldman, 2022).

Recommendation One: Implement Student-led IEP Meetings

Based on these findings, schools and educators should create more structured opportunities for students to participate in their IEP meetings and other decision-making processes actively. The Universal Design for Learning guidelines provided a recent framework to support student-led IEP meetings in which students are more than just participants but take on a leadership role (Bross & Craig, 2024). "When IEPs are developed without student participation, students may come to believe that important decisions about their education and their future will be made for them" (Davis & Cumming, 2019, p. 91). Implementing student-led IEP meetings would empower students with disabilities to find their voice and develop the agency necessary for post-secondary success.

Recommendation Two: Integrate Self-advocacy Instruction into the General Curriculum

Opportunities to build self-advocacy skills should be embedded within the curriculum to empower all students to use their voices in educational decision-making. An exploratory pilot study explored the effects of a self-advocacy intervention to support college-age students with disabilities and found that direct self-advocacy instruction developed stronger repeated behaviors in the future (Roper, 2024). A similar study focusing on a different self-advocacy program with the same target demographic found similar benefits to implementing an explicit self-advocacy program to enhance these students' skill sets (Nieweglowski et al., 2024). Ensuring students are explicitly taught how to express their needs and reflect on

learning supports is vital so they can participate when opportunities arise to be involved in their IEP decision-making process.

Implication Two: Students Often Face Adult-dominated Decision-making and Limited Agency in the IEP Process

The persistent absence of student voice in the IEP process underscores a broader issue of limited agency among students with disabilities. Lalvani (2015) highlighted this gap by focusing solely on adult perceptions of disability, overlooking the insights and experiences of students themselves. This oversight raises concerns about how student perspectives are systematically excluded, diminishing opportunities for student voice and meaningful participation. Caruthers and Friend (2016) further emphasize the power imbalance within educational settings, noting that students, despite being the majority in school communities, are often treated as an oppressed group with little influence, as adults dominate decision-making. This adult-centered approach is especially evident in the IEP process, where parents and educators typically hold the primary decision-making power until the student reaches adulthood (Koca et al., 2023; Rebore & Zirkel, 2000; Yell et al., 2017). Overall, the IEP process often reinforces adult authority at the expense of student empowerment, calling for a more inclusive approach that values and incorporates student voices from an earlier age.

Recommendation One: Train Staff on Power-sharing Practices and Inclusive Communication

Teachers need to understand how power can be shared with students in these settings to promote student agency during meetings and academic planning. While still a transformative approach, the concept of "power-sharing relationships" serves as a navigation tool for educators to build inclusive and responsive classroom communities (Chandler &

Budge, 2023). Recognizing each student as unique and irreplaceable allows teachers to move beyond traditional hierarchical models and engage students as active participants in their learning journeys. This involves implementing instructional methods that foster student agency, cultural humility, and empowerment, thus creating environments where students feel valued and heard.

Recommendation Two: Reevaluate School Practices and Policies that Unintentionally Silence Student Voices

To effectively reevaluate school practices and policies that unintentionally silence student voices, it is essential to critically examine the underlying assumptions and structures that may contribute to this issue. One area of concern is the emphasis on grit and a growth mindset within current education settings. While these concepts promote perseverance and a positive attitude towards learning, an overemphasis can inadvertently lead to deficit thinking (Wormeli, 2018). This perspective places the responsibility of success solely on the student, potentially ignoring systemic barriers and perpetuating harmful stereotypes, particularly for marginalized students. Educators' perceptions significantly impact student engagement and success. Deficit thinking, which attributes students' challenges to internal shortcomings, can hinder student voice and participation (Keller Nicol & Sherrod, 2022). Professional development programs that promote culturally responsive teaching and asset-based perspectives are crucial in shifting these mindsets. Empowering students to participate in decision-making also enhances their sense of agency and inclusion. Research indicates that involving students in shaping their educational experiences fosters a more inclusive school culture (Messiou et al., 2024). Additionally, recognizing students as knowledge-makers highlight the importance of their active engagement in educational settings. By integrating

inclusive decision-making and providing targeted professional development, schools can create environments that amplify student voices and promote equitable educational outcomes for all.

Implication Three: Students Benefit from Having at Least One Trusted Adult Advocate

Feeling heard and supported is critical in students' willingness to speak up. Within every single participant's story was at least one specific adult who took the time to ensure they felt heard and supported and, in turn, made a lasting impact on their educational journeys. Based on the stories shared surrounding this topic, this adult should be outside their IEP case manager. These interactions extended beyond routine accommodations; they were moments of authentic connection that built trust and inspired confidence. "Strong, supportive, mentoring relationships between adults and children at risk for social and academic failure have been associated with improvements in academic performance, school attendance, and self-image" (Glomb et al., 2006, p. 31). When students feel that adults believe in their potential and listen with empathy, they are likelier to engage in their learning and advocate for themselves.

Recommendation One: Create Formal Mentorship Programs

The most practical recommendation revolves around the importance of trusted adult mentorships. Schools should take the time to establish mentorship programs where students with disabilities are paired with a trusted educator who ensures their voices are heard. There are several methods to create this opportunity. A first step would be implementing check-in/check-out processes with supportive adults to begin building a trusting relationship (Boden et al., 2018). One factor contributing to strong, supportive mentoring relationships is pairing children with adult mentors with similar personal characteristics (Glomb et al., 2006).

Additionally, pairing students with disabilities with supportive staff who are trained in student voice facilitation and emotional safety would support the success of this initiative. However, the research in this area is limited.

Recommendation Two: Provide Professional Development for All Staff on Relationship-building Strategies

It is important to note that implementing an effective mentorship program can feel daunting for some teachers. Therefore, there should be training for educators that emphasizes relationship-building to create safe, supportive environments. This would need to include fostering psychological safety, supporting individual learning needs, and promoting positive identity development. However, similar to the research available on the topic of teacher mentorships for students with disabilities, there are also sparse search results for this professional development initiative, which emphasizes the need for more research within this area. It can be assumed that this concept is not built within pre-service programs, just as training in leading IEP meetings is lacking (Beck & DeSutter, 2020; Nur Akcin, 2022).

Summary

This study revealed that students with disabilities deeply value having a voice in their education, especially during IEP meetings. Participant stories emphasized three key implications: students want to engage in educational decisions actively, often face adult-dominated processes that limit their agency, and benefit immensely from trusted adult advocates. While these findings center on students with disabilities, the above recommendations should be considered best practices for all students. Empowering students to lead their learning, speak up for their needs, and build meaningful relationships with adults fosters a more inclusive and equitable school culture. It could, in turn, allow the use of

student voice to be the norm. Research supports those practices like Universal Design for Learning (Bross & Craig, 2024), explicit self-advocacy instruction (Roper, 2024), and culturally responsive pedagogy (Chandler & Budge, 2023; Messiou et al., 2024) benefit all learners, not just students with disabilities, by promoting agency, inclusion, and student voice. By applying these strategies schoolwide, educators can dismantle hierarchical decision-making, build stronger student-adult connections, and ensure every learner feels seen, heard, and empowered.

Recommendations for Future Research

This narrative inquiry explored the lived experiences of eight individuals with IEPs as they reflected on their time in special education and their ability to develop a sense of voice, agency, and self-advocacy throughout their K–12 schooling and beyond. While extensive research exists on special education law, compliance, and transition planning, there is a notable gap in the literature that centers on the voices of students themselves. This study uniquely contributes to that gap by amplifying the storied experiences of students navigating special education. The participants represent a diverse range of post-secondary paths and identities. However, all were once students with IEPs navigating a system that prioritized adult voices and procedural compliance over genuine collaboration and support. Their stories reveal deeply embedded narratives about special education, such as what it means to be "successful," who gets to make decisions, and how support is given and withheld. By focusing on their reflections, this inquiry provides insight into how students' experiences can inform more inclusive, empowering practices. Although the broader sociopolitical climate was unforeseen at the start of this research, it has only emphasized the critical need to center student voices in discussions around special education reform. More research is needed to

continue challenging deficit-based assumptions and to reimagine policies and practices that truly support the whole child. The following are recommendations for future research:

- Conduct the same study with a larger number of participants.
- Explore the experiences of students with disabilities from a more diverse (cultural, racial, and linguistic) pool of applicants.
- Conduct a similar study that includes observations of participants currently in the K-12 setting.
- Design and evaluate pilot programs for student-led IEPs and mentorship to build an emerging evidence base.
- Examine the perspectives of educators and case managers on student participation in the IEP process.
- Explore the emotional and psychological impact of being excluded from decision-making conversations.

These recommendations share a common goal of deepening and broadening the understanding of student voice, agency, and inclusion in the special education process, particularly within the context of the IEP (Sanderson & Goldman, 2022). I close this narrative inquiry by reflecting on this journey and what I have learned about myself as a leader through this process.

Final Reflection

Three and a half years ago, I began this doctoral journey unsure of what would unfold. I was frustrated by hearing colleagues define students' potential through the lens of deficit thinking, dictating what they could or could not achieve based on preconceived notions rather than possibilities. The very individuals charged with advocating for students were often the ones gatekeeping opportunities and limiting access. Though I have transitioned from a formal role in special education, I still witness these same inequities in my current leadership position. As I navigate my new role, I continually ask: "Who are we to determine what students can and cannot do?"

The original concept for this dissertation sparked from my brother's experience within an academically rigorous high school program. My sister and I both completed the same program and were not met with the struggles my brother encountered. All three of us had the same family dynamics and upbringing; the only difference was that he had a reading disability. With his IEP, I thought he should have found the same success. I was left wondering what was missing that could have been in place for him to have a different experience. While this study took some twists and turns beyond what I originally intended, the findings and stories I was able to collect were beyond what I could have imagined.

When I began this study, the only topic I felt confident discussing was special education support. As a special educator for most of my career, this felt the most comfortable. Leadership styles, systemic barriers, and identity formation theory were all new concepts that I had to immerse myself in the literature to truly comprehend. I have always thought of myself as a life-long learner and that became even more apparent in this project. With any new learning, there come challenges and perseverance. This long road connected me with the experiences my participants felt climbing Mount Spededemic.

As I managed late nights and full weekends of writing and research, I homed in on the resilience and motivation that many of my participants indicated was necessary for their post-secondary success. The true indication of motivation came when I began my research at seven weeks pregnant and completed this chapter a long but quick seven months later. Being able to show my son firsthand what hard work, belief in others, and unwavering dedication can achieve is not only a gift for him but the legacy I hope to carry forward as both a mother and a leader committed to equity. The timing, the growth, and the commitment all reinforced my evolving identity as an educational leader.

APPENDIX A

MIXED-METHODS QUESTIONNAIRE

Within the literature, student voice definitions range from students simply sharing their opinions to collaborating with adults to solve problems to fully taking charge of a change initiative within the school building (Mitra, 2018). For the purposes of this study, the term student voice means being able to give your input to your guide educational experiences.

Demographic Information:

- What is your age? (Please specify)
- What is your gender? (Male/Female/Non-binary/Other)
- What is your race/ethnicity? (Please specify)
- What is your highest level of education completed?
- What is your current occupation?

Knowledge and Attitudes:

- How familiar are you with the concept of student voice in special education? (Likert scale)
- To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "Student voice is essential for effective special education services"? (Likert Scale)
- Describe your experience in special education (Open-ended)
- How would you rate your involvement in your IEP meetings? (Likert scale)
- Did you have opportunities to incorporate your voice in your K-12 experience? If yes, please describe.
- What do you perceive were the biggest challenges to utilizing your voice in your K-12 experience? (Open-ended)
- What supports or resources did you find helpful in using your voice in your K-12 experience? (Open-ended)

Research Participation:

- Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview and reflection journal prompts to discuss your experiences in special education in more detail? (Yes/No)
- What is your preferred method of contact for follow-up? (Email/Phone/Other)
- Would you be willing to recommend this survey to peers who have had experience in special education? If so, please provide their email address(es) below:

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Tell me about your experiences with the IEP Process?
    a. Tell me about an experience that stands out to you.
2. Suppose you were back in your most familiar school setting. How would you describe your experiences?
    a. If they talk about barriers - Please tell me about any strategies that you used to overcome those barriers.
    b. If they talk about successes – Please tell me about any strategies that were utilized to reach that success.
3. What was the IEP process like for you, as a student?
    a. How often did you actively participate in the IEP process? How often did you see other students actively participate in their education?
    b. Provide an example of what that student voice looked and sounded like?
4. Tell me about the special education services you are most familiar with.
    a. Provide an example of how those services supported or did not support you.
5. What do you believe is the most important skill a student should develop in high school to prepare for post-secondary life?
6. What supports do you think students in special education students need?
    a. Describe a successful student in special education.
7. Are there any other stories you would like to share about your experiences in special education?

APPENDIX C

REFLECTION JOURNAL PROMPTS

- Reflect on your overall experience with the interview. Did it bring up any unexpected emotions or memories?
- Were there any questions that were particularly difficult to answer or made you uncomfortable?
- How did participating in this interview compare to your experiences sharing your perspective on special education in the past?
- What would you like to see changed in education to better support students with disabilities?
- What advice would you give to current students with disabilities who are trying to find their voice?
- Is there anything else you would like to add to your story that was not mentioned within the interview?

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VITA

Riley Katherin Galloway was born and raised in Kansas City, MO. Her early, formative years took place in a Montessori setting before attending public school first through twelfth grade in the North Kansas City School District. She graduated from North Kansas City High School in May of 2010 with an International Baccalaureate Diploma. In August 2010, she began her undergraduate career at the University of Missouri – Columbia (Mizzou), earning a Bachelor of Science in Special Education in May 2015. During her time at Mizzou, she participated in undergraduate research through the Education Honors Program.

Mrs. Galloway began her teaching career in August 2015 as a high school special education teacher in the North Kansas City School District. After earning a Master of Education degree in International Education, she spent a year teaching middle school learning support in Guatemala. Upon returning to the United States, she taught for one year at a charter school before rejoining the North Kansas City School District as a high school special education teacher. In August 2021, she transitioned into her current position as an AVID Coordinator for the district. Upon completion of her degree requirements, Mrs. Galloway plans to continue her career in education while balancing family life as she embraces her new role as a mom this summer.