

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE SHARED LIVED EXPERIENCES OF
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN INCLUSION CLASSROOMS

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of inclusion for students with disabilities regarding the practice of inclusion at a rural middle school in Southwest Virginia. The theories guiding this study were Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development and Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The central research question for the study was: What are the shared lived experiences of students with disabilities in an inclusion classroom? Other questions addressed social and academic experiences of students with disabilities in inclusion classrooms. The study took place in intermediate and middle schools in rural Southwest Virginia. Purposeful sampling was used to select a group of students with disabilities that could provide information. The sample included thirteen, fifth through eighth grade students between the ages of 10 and 14. Data were collected through individual interviews, observations in the inclusion classroom, and a focus group of students with disabilities, which allowed triangulation. The researcher examined the data for themes regarding the lived experience of inclusion for students with disabilities in fourth through eighth grades. Analysis of the data provided three themes including, relationships, equity, and acceptance. The major factor that contributed to the success of inclusion and feelings of social acceptance and academic gains among the participants was the attitude of the teacher. The participants described feeling accepted and achieving success academically due to their teachers' positive attitudes. In addition, the participants described the learning atmosphere and described the different strategies implemented by the teachers to help them succeed.

Keywords: inclusion, phenomenology, social acceptance, students with disabilities

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my faithful and loving husband who has always been my biggest fan and supporter throughout this journey. During times of doubt, he has provided me with encouragement and praise. He has always been a source of inspiration during times when I could not see the best in myself. He has constantly reminded me of my worth and I am forever grateful for his vision of myself that I could not see. Thank you, Chad, for your love, support, and faith in me not only during this time but throughout our marriage.

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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	3
Dedication.....	4
Acknowledgments.....	5
List of Tables	11
List of Abbreviations	12
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	13
Overview.....	13
Background.....	13
Historical Context.....	14
Social Context.....	16
Theoretical Context.....	17
Situation to Self.....	19
Problem Statement	21
Purpose Statement.....	22
Significance of the Study	22
Empirical.....	23
Theoretical	24
Practical.....	25
Research Questions.....	26
Central Research Question.....	27
Definitions.....	28
Summary	28

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	30
Overview	30
Theoretical Framework	31
Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs	31
Lev Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development	33
Correlation of Theories to the Research	34
Related Literature	34
Inclusion	35
Teacher Perception of Inclusion	43
Students with Disabilities Perceptions of Inclusion	54
Summary	64
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS	67
Overview	67
Design	67
Research Question	71
Setting	71
Participants	73
Procedures	75
The Researcher's Role	78
Data Collection	80
Individual Interviews	81
Observations	84
Focus Groups	85

Data Analysis	87
Trustworthiness	89
Credibility	90
Dependability and Confirmability	90
Transferability	91
Ethical Considerations	91
Summary	92
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS	94
Overview	94
Participants	94
Amy	97
Aaron	98
Alana	99
Brian	101
Braylon	102
Brad	103
Chloe	106
Chris	108
Colin	110
Dana	112
David	113
Dylan	116
Frank	117

Results.....	119
Major Theme One: Relationships	121
Major Theme Two: Equity.....	131
Major Theme Three: Acceptance.....	132
Research Question Responses.....	133
Research Question Responses: Central Research Question.....	134
Research Question Responses: SQ1	135
Research Question Responses: SQ2	137
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION.....	141
Overview.....	141
Summary of Findings.....	141
Discussion.....	152
Empirical Literature	153
Theoretical Literature.....	161
Implications.....	164
Theoretical Implications	164
Empirical Implications.....	168
Practical Implications.....	169
Delimitations and Limitations.....	172
Recommendations for Future Research	174
Summary.....	177
References.....	180
Appendix A Administration Form	193

Appendix B Parent/ Guardian Form	195
Appendix C Child Assent Form.....	199
Appendix D Interview Questions/Guide.....	201
Appendix E Observation Protocol	202
Appendix F Focus Group Questions	203

List of Tables

Table 1: Participants' Demographics96

Table 2: Themes.....118

List of Abbreviations

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

Emotional-Behavioral Disorder (EBD)

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Inclusion is the practice of integrating students with disabilities into the general education classroom to participate in social and academic activities and receive educational training with their non-disabled peers (Avcioğlu, 2016; Dieker & Hines, 2014). The practice of inclusion promotes acceptance among peers both socially and academically and promotes awareness of disabilities (Biliás-Lolis, Gelber, Rispoli, Bray, & Maykel, 2017). One factor that determines the success of an inclusion classroom is the attitude of the educator towards inclusion. Researchers have conducted a suitable amount of research on educators' views and perceptions in an inclusion setting. The attitude of the teacher is an essential factor and has a significant effect on the success of students in an inclusive classroom (Monsen, Ewing, & Kwoka, 2014). However, there is a lack of research on the lived experiences of students with disabilities and how they perceive their success academically and socially from an inclusion classroom. Chapter One contains the background, situation to self, problem statement, purpose statement, significance of the study, research questions, definitions, and summary.

Background

The background for the problem and purpose of this research study includes the historical context of education for children with disabilities and how laws were enacted to provide for children with disabilities to be educated with their non-disabled peers. In addition, the social context of inclusion is discussed, along with how the practice of inclusion integrates children with disabilities into the general education setting to receive with non-disabled peers. Finally, the theoretical background is included as a discussion of the theories associated with the purpose of the current study.

Historical Context

Children with disabilities were segregated from general education classrooms during the years from 1950 to the 1960s. During this period, children with disabilities either stayed at home or may have been institutionalized (Dieker & Hines, 2014). As the years progressed, children with disabilities eventually had the opportunity to attend school, and in 1970, institutions that once housed children with disabilities began to close (Dieker & Hines, 2014). In 1975, Public Law 94-142, known as Education for All Handicapped Children Act, was signed, opening the option to attend public schools for children with disabilities. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act stated that children with disabilities were entitled to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (Zhang & Hu, 2015). As a result, children with disabilities accessed the general education curriculum as their least restrictive environment for education (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1990).

In the 1980s, the Regular Education Initiative Act was passed. The Regular Education Initiative Act required classrooms to have diverse students, both with and without disabilities. Including students with disabilities in a general education setting, especially in more academic settings, benefits all students. This push for inclusion continued in the 1990s, allowing students with disabilities to participate in general education classroom settings both socially and academically whenever possible (Wexler, 2016). As time progressed, parents became advocates for their children to receive an education in the least restrictive environment (Dieker & Hines, 2014; Zhang & Hu, 2015). The least restrictive environment (LRE) provides the opportunity for students with disabilities to learn in the general education classroom alongside their non-disabled peers. The purpose of the least restrictive environment is to facilitate the inclusion of students with disabilities and prevent segregation based on the disability of the child (Giangreco, 2020).

When considering LRE, the goal is to ask how the classroom and teacher can change and grow to support and teach students with disabilities, not how the child can perform in the classroom (Giangreco, 2020). Therefore, support is given to students with disabilities to help them succeed in the general education classroom, setting both academically and socially. Furthermore, the law requires students with disabilities to be educated in a general education setting to the maximum extent whenever possible (Chapman, 2013; Giangreco, 2020; Wright, Wright, & O'Connor, 2015).

Over the years, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, Public Law 94-142, was reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Over the last forty years, the practice of inclusion has increased, and expectations for students with disabilities to participate in general education settings have advanced. In classrooms today, more than sixty-two percent of children with disabilities participate in general education classrooms with their same-aged, non-disabled peers (Individuals with Disabilities Act, 1990.). In addition, students with disabilities spend longer than 80% of the school day in a general education classroom with their non-disabled peers (Gilmour, 2018; Wexler, 2016; Zhang & Hu, 2015).

Inclusive practices in the schools and classrooms should be authentic and meaningful for all students. Stating that a school or classroom is inclusive is not accurate unless all students are supported with learning and are encouraged to contribute to the classroom and the school (Thompson & Timmons, 2017). Different strategies, techniques, and practices are used within inclusive classrooms to help students with disabilities progress academically and socially. Among the practices used are evidence-based practices, which are practices that produce a consistent and predictable outcome for learners (Martin, Spooner, & Singer, 2017; Russo-Campisi, 2017; Silveira-Zaldivar & Curtis, 2019). Evidence-based practices are continuously

and rigorously tested among diverse groups of students, and the practices aid in reducing academic gaps for struggling learners (Martin, Spooner, & Singer, 2017).

Social Context

The practice of inclusion in public schools today promotes the ideas of acceptance and a sense of belonging for students with disabilities. In an inclusion setting, children with disabilities receive instruction with support and accommodations and their non-disabled peers in their neighborhood school. The practice of inclusion promotes and develops social interaction and peer-acceptance among students with and without disabilities, therefore providing opportunities for students with disabilities to engage with students that are non-disabled (Avcioglu, 2017; Chapman, 2013; Kart & Kart, 2021; Taub & Foster, 2020). However, even for compassionate and caring teachers, this transition has not always been smooth. Educators who have not taught students with disabilities may feel unprepared or uncomfortable in this type of setting (Dieker & Hines, 2014; Dovigo, 2020). Therefore, the role of an educator is a significant factor in an inclusive classroom. An educator who employs a positive attitude towards the students in an inclusive classroom creates a positive atmosphere for the students, promoting academic and social success for students with and without disabilities (Avcioglu, 2017; Foraker 2020).

The effect of a teacher who has a negative attitude towards inclusion can create a negative atmosphere for the students and affect the success of the students with disabilities. Educators that feel inadequate or worry about balancing the needs of all students may exhibit these feelings during instruction and with classroom management, therefore negatively impacting the purpose of inclusion (Cameron, 2014; Kaczorowski & Kline, 2021). In addition, factors such as lack of training, large classroom size, and lack of resources influence the teacher's attitude toward teaching students with disabilities (Cameron, 2014; Ferriday & Cantali,

2020). Students with disabilities in these educational environments may not feel socially and academically accepted by the teacher.

Parents that have children with disabilities promote their children receiving instruction in an inclusion classroom because it promotes peer acceptance and improves social interaction due to the modeling of actions from other non-disabled peers (Blackmore, Aylward, & Grace, 2016; Sira, Maine, & McNeil, 2018). Blackmore et al. (2016) explain that several parents' motivation for an inclusion classroom is to promote social interaction among the same-aged peers and modeling appropriate behaviors. Furthermore, many parents had observed a positive change in their child when they had the opportunity to participate in an inclusion classroom. Parents explained that their children felt a sense of belonging when actively involved in an inclusion classroom. The behaviors of the children improved along with other characteristics such as communication and social development (Blackmore et al., 2016; Sira et al., 2018).

Theoretical Context

The practice of inclusion correlates with Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow explained that in order to achieve self-actualization, the highest tier of the hierarchy, other needs must be met, such as physiological needs and needs associated with safety. Among the different needs, Maslow mentions a sense of belonging and feeling safe (Maslow, 1943). The practice of inclusion stopped the segregation of students with disabilities, giving them opportunities to be in an environment with their same-aged peers (Avcioglu, 2016; Bossaert et al., 2015; Dieker & Hines, 2014). Therefore, establishing a sense of belonging in a classroom with students without disabilities. Thus, the practice of inclusion helps to fulfill some of the levels of the hierarchy, such as love, a sense of belonging, and safety. If a child with a disability feels as if he or she is

accepted, safe, and loved, this will build self-esteem and help the child achieve self-actualization (Maslow, 1943).

Lev Vygotsky developed a cognitive theory known as the sociocultural theory of cognitive development. Vygotsky's theory stated that children develop and advance by interacting with others (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky also explains that children learn from more advanced learners (Vygotsky, 1978). By integrating students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers, social and academic learning opportunities are given through the practice of inclusion. The practice of inclusion supports Vygotsky's theory by placing students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers in a general education setting. By interacting with advanced peers, children with disabilities will develop socially and construct knowledge. Children with disabilities will model behaviors and actions and therefore acquire needed social skills (Vygotsky, 1978).

The practice of inclusion provides students with disabilities opportunities to interact and engage with their non-disabled peers. A sense of belonging and membership to an environment, positive social relationships and friendships, and learning to the fullest potential are among the desired results of an inclusive experience for students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers (Zhang & Hu, 2015). Through observation, interaction, and engagement with their peers, students gain acceptance and knowledge. Inclusion is an essential tool in facilitating the opportunities for students with disabilities to become independent learners and gain appropriate social skills (Avcioglu, 2016). Moreover, it is imperative that children with disabilities feel socially and academically accepted to fulfill the sense of belonging and move towards self-actualization according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943).

Situation to Self

As a former general education teacher and a present special education teacher, understanding the perceptions of inclusion from students with a disability is imperative to provide the least restrictive environment with social and academic success for the students. As a general education teacher, my idea of inclusion was to provide a positive and accepting atmosphere for all students with the necessary support to ensure success. During co-teaching, the special education teacher and I would exchange roles and work with different students so that no students would feel separated or different from their peers. The students with disabilities would not leave the classroom for pull-out services, but instead, they would be provided support in small groups within the classroom. If a group of students left the room to receive reinforcement, the group would consist of students with and without disabilities.

As I switched roles from a general education teacher to a special education teacher, I observed and participated in inclusion classrooms where I co-taught and provided support within the classroom and in classrooms where I was told to take my children to another location to complete the activities. I observed different reactions from the students. For example, several students felt segregated from their peers because they had to leave the room to receive a read-aloud accommodation. When I worked as a special education teacher at the middle school, many of the students did not want to leave the room for the accommodations or did not want to use headphones if they stayed in the room because they did not want peers to view them as different. They felt as if they were being singled out due to their disability.

The philosophical assumption used for this study is the ontological assumption. Creswell and Poth (2018) describe this assumption as relating to the “nature of reality and its characteristics” (p.20). This assumption embraces multiple realities. In an ontological

assumption, individuals may vary in their experiences and realities, providing different views and perceptions of experiences. Creswell and Poth (2018) describe the epistemological assumption as the researcher getting “as close as possible to the participants being studied” (p.20). Therefore, lessening the distance between him or herself and getting firsthand information from the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, Creswell and Poth (2018) describe an axiological assumption as the researcher describing his or her social position and personal experience. Furthermore, the researcher openly describes experiences that have shaped his or her values (Creswell and Poth, 2018). In this study, the lived experiences of inclusion for students with disabilities may vary in experiences and realities. Therefore, information was collected and examined for the differences and the common themes of inclusion (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

The paradigm framework that will guide this study is the social constructivism framework. The research is a phenomenology of the shared experiences of the perceptions of students with disabilities in grades fourth through eighth. Creswell and Poth (2018) describe the social constructivism paradigm as when “individuals see understanding of the world in which they live and work” (p. 24). Furthermore, meaning is constructed from the experiences of individuals. Creswell and Poth (2018) explain that the meanings from the experiences can be different and varied among individuals. Additionally, the experiences of the individuals can be subjective, and the goal is to focus on the experiences and the views of the participants. Once the views from the participants are gathered, patterns and theories among the experiences can be examined.

Problem Statement

Avcioglu (2016) explained that IDEA (2004) defined inclusion as “placing students with special needs in the general education classroom” (p. 464), giving students with special needs opportunities to engage socially and learn alongside their non-disabled peers. The practice of inclusion supports integrating students with disabilities into a general education classroom to give opportunities for acceptance, both socially and academically. Furthermore, providing access to the general education curriculum and setting high expectations for learning (Avcioglu, 2016; Bossaert et al., 2015; Dieker & Hines, 2014; Saloviita & Consegna, 2019). Researchers have examined the perception of teachers on the practice of inclusion. Monsen, Ewing, and Kwoka (2014) discussed the influence of a teacher’s attitude towards inclusion and the correlation of a teacher demonstrating a positive attitude and its effect on the classroom. The teacher’s attitude and perception of inclusion substantially impact students and their performance (Dovigo, 2020; Monsen et al., 2014; Trent, 2020).

Rose and Shevlin (2017) discuss that much attention has been given to teachers’ perceptions and attitudes towards inclusion but not a great deal of information has been reported on the lived experiences of students with disabilities in inclusion classrooms. Rose and Shevlin (2017) examined students with disabilities and their feelings toward inclusion. Students report that the main factor of inclusion is feeling accepted and a sense of belonging by their peers and teachers. Colum and McIntyre (2019) explained that positive interaction in an inclusion setting between children with and without disabilities creates a sense of belonging for children with disabilities. Furthermore, teachers can facilitate a sense of belonging for children with disabilities and encourage academic success (Colum & McIntyre, 2019). The problem this study addressed was that although the purpose of inclusion is to integrate students with disabilities with their non-

disabled peers for academic and social opportunities in a general education classroom setting, not all students with disabilities experienced engaging social and academic opportunities in an inclusion setting. In addition, there is a lack or gap in the literature discussing the shared experiences of students with disabilities in an inclusion setting and their perception of social acceptance and academic learning (Rose & Shevlin, 2017).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of inclusion for students with disabilities in fourth through eighth grade regarding the practice of inclusion at both a rural intermediate and middle school in Southwest Virginia. At this stage in the research, inclusion was generally defined as students with disabilities participating in a general education classroom with their non-disabled peers, providing them with opportunities to learn and socially engage with their non-disabled peers (Avcioğlu, 2016). The theories guiding this study included Maslow's hierarchy of needs as it explains the need for loving and social acceptance for individuals to be able to reach self-actualization (Maslow, 1943) and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development as it explains that individuals learn from the culture they are emerged into (Vygotsky, 1978).

Significance of the Study

Research such as Urton et al. (2014) on the attitudes of principals and teachers toward inclusion has focused solely on the perception of teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. Urton et al. (2014) explained that a critical factor in a teacher's perception of inclusion is the teachers' attitude. If a teacher has a positive attitude and embraces the diversity of inclusion, then he or she will create a positive learning environment that will foster social and academic success (Trent, 2020; Urton et al., 2014) Urton et al. (2014) also describe how the experience and efficacy of the

teacher affected the atmosphere of the inclusion classroom, stating that if the teacher is confident and feels that he or she knows the content and strategies, then again, a positive atmosphere will be created for an inclusive classroom. Strategies include evidence-based practices that the teachers have received training on, therefore, helping promote a high sense of teacher efficacy (Russo-Campisi, 2017). Using evidence-based practices helps the general education teacher obtain consistent and predictable outcomes from struggling students and students with disabilities, increasing the teacher's self-confidence by providing effective learning strategies (Martin, Spooner, & Singer, 2017; Silveira-Zaldivar & Curtis, 2019; Weiss & Rodgers, 2020). The positivity of the teacher can also correlate with students with disabilities feeling accepted and integrated with non-disabled peers. Furthermore, Strogilos and Avramidis (2016) described the experience of teachers that have co-taught in inclusion classrooms and the positive effects co-teaching has on student behavior and academic success. Educators reported feeling confident when co-teaching because both teachers provided support to the students and the curriculum's content.

Empirical

Although there has been a significant amount of research reporting on teachers' perceptions of inclusion classrooms, there was limited research reporting the shared experiences of inclusion from students with disabilities (Gilmour, 2018). A study completed by Kirby (2017) reported that students with disabilities often feel stigmatized by the label of a learning disability. Kirby (2017) explained that although students with a learning disability scored high in academic areas, the stigma of a label hindered their views of their success. Furthermore, Kirby (2017) explained that students with disabilities were cognizant of their teachers' perceptions of them, and therefore, these perceptions left students with disabilities feeling inadequate. Tomlinson

(2020) stated that a critical component missing in research is the voice of students with disabilities. Tomlinson (2020) also explained that information from students with disabilities could improve practices in education. Rose and Shevlin (2017) stated a need for more exploration of the lived experiences and perceptions of students with disabilities. Information and data were gathered on the practice of inclusion from students with disabilities that have participated in these classroom settings because students with disabilities were the primary stakeholders (Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Shaw, 2017). Furthermore, Rose and Shevlin (2017) and Shaw (2017) mentioned that for special education policy to continue, narratives and experiences from students with disabilities from their experiences in an inclusion classroom could provide information towards the practice of inclusion.

Theoretical

The purpose of an inclusion classroom is to provide students with access to the curriculum in a general education setting with non-disabled peers (Avcioglu, 2016; Chapman, 2013; Dieker & Hines, 2014). Providing students with this environment gives them access to the general education curriculum and opportunities to engage with their non-disabled peers with the use of accommodations and support. The practice of inclusion compliments Maslow's hierarchy of needs by providing students with disabilities a sense of belonging with their same-aged, non-disabled peers in the general education setting (Maslow, 1943). Maslow's hierarchy of needs describes the need for all humans to feel a sense of belongingness in social groups. Tomlinson (2020) stated that this need for belongingness is especially powerful in children and, therefore, in inclusion. Tomlinson (2020) explained that the practice of inclusion with students with disabilities working alongside their non-disabled peers is crucial to becoming a complete human being, relating this to the level in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, love and belonging. Success has

been obtained in schools in rural areas with economic hardships and low-performing students when the administration implemented Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Fisher & Crawford, 2020). In addition, including students with disabilities in a general education classroom promotes the integration of students with disabilities instead of the segregation in earlier decades (Dieker & Hines, 2014). Tomlinson (2020) explained that inclusion should not be viewed as a place but rather as a need for belongingness and feeling a sense of worth, which correlates to Maslow's theory that this need must be met before self-actualization can occur. Furthermore, the practice of inclusion correlated with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development, providing students with disabilities with access to the general education curriculum gives them access to that specific culture and allows them opportunities to learn from their non-disabled peers (Blackmore et al., 2016; Vygotsky, 1978). Providing data on the shared lived experiences of students with disabilities in inclusion classrooms provided information to examine familiar themes on feelings of social acceptance, belonging, and academic growth.

Practical

This study benefited students with disabilities, the parents of the students, and educators and administrators by providing data on the perceptions of the students to improve inclusion practices. In a school, just because students with disabilities are integrated into a learning or social environment with students without disabilities does not guarantee learning and social acceptance (Overton, Wrench, & Garrett, 2017). Although the purpose of inclusion is to promote the acceptance and integration of students with disabilities, not all students with disabilities experience feelings of acceptance from their peers, teachers, or their community (Kirby, 2017; Strnadova, Johnson, & Walmsley, 2018). Students with disabilities such as autism or an intellectual disability reported that although they were in inclusive settings, they felt more

isolated than included (Silveira-Zaldivar & Curtis, 2019; Strnadova et al., 2018). Individuals with disabilities view their sense of belonging depending on several different factors, including how other individuals view them and the relationships made with peers, teachers, and others in the community (Strnadova et al., 2018). Students with learning disabilities have felt as if they have been labeled by teachers due to their disabilities. Therefore, they have not experienced feelings of acceptance or a sense of belonging from the practice of inclusion (Kirby, 2017). Providing information from students with disabilities about their experiences with inclusion provided an understanding of the effectiveness of inclusion and if the practice of inclusion thoroughly provides opportunities for integrating students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers. Overall, if the student with a disability feels a sense of belonging and is socially engaging and learning, then he or she will be academically and socially successful (Parkay, Anctil, & Hass, 2014). However, if the student with a disability does not feel as if he or she is socially accepted, then the data could provide information that could be used to improve the practice of inclusion.

Research Questions

The questions used during the research are centered on the effectiveness of inclusion through the lived experiences of students with disabilities. The purpose of inclusion brought forth by IDEA (2004) was to eliminate segregation of students with disabilities from their non-disabled peers and provide them with opportunities to socially engage and gain academic knowledge (Avcioglu, 2016; Bossaert et al., 2015). Therefore, the questions investigated the experiences of social acceptance and academic success in an inclusion classroom.

Central Research Question

What are the shared lived experiences of students with disabilities in grades fourth through eighth in an inclusion classroom?

The central research question presented the overall information that will be collected. It was divided into two sub-questions to address the social and academic aspects of inclusion through the lived experiences of students with disabilities. The practice of inclusion integrates students with disabilities into the same learning environment as their non-disabled peers, correlating with the theoretical frameworks of Vygotsky (1978) and Maslow (1943). Vygotsky (1978) explained that children learn from interaction with other children. Maslow (1943) stated that in order for individuals to accomplish self-actualization, they must meet basic needs such as physiological needs and safety needs, the latter of which includes feeling as if they belong and are loved. The central question and sub-questions were designed to gather information that correlates with the themes and provides information on the effectiveness of inclusion.

Sub-Question One: What are the shared lived experiences of students with disabilities regarding the feelings of acceptance in the inclusion classroom?

The first sub-question addressed the feeling of acceptance among the students with disabilities from their peers and teachers. In order for individuals to reach the level of self-actualization and be able to experience self-confidence, Maslow explained that individuals need to feel a sense of belonging in the earlier stages of the hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). Individuals need to feel safe, loved, and accepted by others (Maslow, 1943). Before self-actualization can occur, these earlier needs must be met (Maslow, 1943). This question was directed toward the lived experiences of students with disabilities regarding the feelings of belonging and being accepted by their non-disabled peers and the general education teacher.

Sub-Question Two: What are the shared lived experiences of students with disabilities regarding academic learning in an inclusion classroom?

The second sub-question addressed the shared lived experiences of students with disabilities and their instruction within the inclusion classroom. Vygotsky explained that when individuals are engaged in different cultures, such as a school setting, they will learn from interactions among the individuals in that environment (Vygotsky, 1978). The practice of inclusion provides students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum and opportunities to learn with their non-disabled peers (Avcioglu, 2016; Dieker & Hines, 2014). Students with disabilities are accountable for the standards taught in the classroom. This question addressed how students feel about the academic setting in an inclusion classroom and their views of academic success.

Definitions

1. *Inclusion* – the practice of educating students with special needs in regular classrooms in neighborhood schools. (Wright, Wright, & O’Connor, 2015)
2. *Least restrictive environment* – refers to the requirement to educate special needs children with children who are not disabled to the maximum extent possible. (Wright, Wright, & O’Connor, 2015)
3. *Special education*- specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability (Wright, Wright, & O’Connor, 2015).

Summary

Chapter One of the present study introduced the transcendental phenomenological study of the shared lived experiences of students with disabilities regarding the effectiveness of inclusion. Existing literature examined the purpose of inclusion and perceptions of educators who are responsible for teaching an inclusion class. However, a gap existed in the literature on

the lived experiences of students with disabilities regarding the effectiveness of an inclusion classroom, primarily focusing on social acceptance and the academic success of students with disabilities. The theoretical framework significant to this study included the work of Maslow (1943) and the work of Vygotsky (1978). Both theorists focused on the importance of relationships and learning from other individuals (Maslow, 1943; Vygotsky, 1978). In Chapter One, I described my reasoning for examining the lived experiences of students with disabilities in an inclusion setting and the importance of this study as it pertains to the practice of inclusion. This study was significant because it provided information from students with disabilities regarding the practice of inclusion and gathered data on social and academic success through the perception of students with disabilities.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Before the 1960s, individuals with disabilities were segregated from general education settings due to having a disability. Individuals with disabilities were not considered integral members of society. Due to their disability, these individuals were practically hidden at home or placed in institutions (Dieker & Hines, 2014). As time progressed, laws were enacted to include individuals with disabilities in school settings. Eventually, rules introduced by IDEA (2004) promoted the practice of inclusion. The practice of inclusion gives access to the general education curriculum to students with disabilities allowing them to engage socially and academically (Dieker & Hines, 2014).

Chapter Two discusses the correlation of the practice of inclusion to the theories of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development. Inclusion provides opportunities for students with disabilities to feel a sense of belonging and opportunities to engage and learn from their non-disabled peers. In this chapter, descriptions of the research on the perceptions of teachers toward teaching students with disabilities and the connection between these attitudes and successful practices of inclusion are provided. Although there is not a significant amount of research on the experiences and perceptions of students with disabilities toward the practice and effectiveness of inclusion, some of the limited research has been provided. This research discusses the perceptions and experiences of students with disabilities on the practice of inclusion. Within the literature, researchers such as Rose & Shevlin (2014) discuss the need for more research on the experiences of students with disabilities in inclusion classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

Although there is not a universal definition of inclusion and the term has a multitude of descriptions, a common description of inclusion includes students with disabilities having access to the general education curriculum in a classroom alongside their non-disabled peers (Avcioglu, 2016; Bossaert et al., 2015; Dieker & Hines, 2014; Hodkinson, 2020; Taub & Foster, 2020). An inclusive classroom provides students with opportunities to engage socially with other students that do not have disabilities. Students with disabilities can learn from other non-disabled peers in an inclusion classroom (Avcioglu, 2016; Bossaert et al., 2015; Dieker & Hines, 2014; Taub & Foster, 2020). The practice of inclusion follows Maslow's hierarchy of needs because, according to Maslow (1943), all individuals need to experience a sense of belonging and acceptance before reaching self-actualization, the highest tier of the hierarchy. Placing students with disabilities with students in a general education classroom gives opportunities for acceptance among students of various disabilities. Furthermore, an inclusion classroom aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory. Individuals learn from the cultures they are placed in and from socializing with other individuals (Vygotsky, 1978).

Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Abraham Maslow expressed the belief that all people have the desire to achieve their maximum potential, and they are motivated by first fulfilling basic needs (Maslow, 1943). This hierarchal approach, which is divided into different levels, leads to human motivation as the levels are satisfied. Once the basic needs, such as physiological ones, are met, the individual can move to the next level, safety. Maslow (1943) described the level of achieving safety as individuals or students who feel they have secured true friendships and received love and affection. Maslow placed the need for belonging above the need for knowledge, understanding,

and esteem, emphasizing the importance of belonging before other needs (London & Ingram, 2018). Once the individual has experienced such feelings as love and achieved self-esteem, then he or she can move on to reach his or her maximum potential, which is self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). Maslow (1943) stated that individuals would reach self-actualization when they have successfully achieved all other levels. When an individual reaches self-actualization, he or she will have the confidence to demonstrate his or her talents and abilities to the fullest (Maslow 1943).

Parkay et al. (2014) explained that students would place differently about where they are on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. For example, physiological needs are usually met at home with the basic needs of satisfying hunger and sleep requirements. However, the need for safety, which includes securing friendships and receiving acceptance and feelings of belonging, occurs at home and in school. Building relationships with peers and teachers can help satisfy this level in Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Parkay et al., 2014). Inclusion promotes social interaction among students with disabilities and non-disabled students by placing students in general education classrooms (Bossaert et al., 2015). Teachers give opportunities for social participation by integrating students with disabilities into a general education classroom with non-disabled peers. Social participation and interaction of students with disabilities include feeling accepted by other peers in the classroom, constructing social relationships with the general education teacher, and constructing friendships with non-disabled peers. Social participation also includes the students with disabilities' perceptions of being accepted by their same-aged peers (Bossaert et al., 2015). The practice of inclusion helps to fulfill the level of the hierarchy known as safety because the atmosphere of inclusion gives opportunities for students with disabilities to form a sense of belonging, friendships, and acceptance among peers and the teacher. If a child with a disability

feels as if he or she is accepted, safe, and loved, this will build self-esteem and help the child achieve self-actualization (Maslow, 1943).

Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development

Lev Vygotsky developed a cognitive theory known as the sociocultural theory of cognitive development. Vygotsky's theory stated that children develop and advance by interacting with others in different cultures (Vygotsky, 1978). Among these cultures, he mentioned school. Vygotsky (1978) believed that social learning comes before cognitive development and that while children engage, children are constructing knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). He explained that learning is a social and interactive process when children are engaged, active participants in the activity (Bowles, Radford, & Bakopoulou, 2018). Vygotsky (1978) also explained that children learn more from being included in cultures or environments with advanced learners. Social interaction which occurs between struggling students and more knowledgeable students provides opportunities for the students that are struggling to learn from their peers (Shabani, 2016). In an environment such as an inclusion classroom, students are not independent of the classroom, but instead, they are a part of that classroom. Furthermore, Vygotsky developed the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD is the area in which students are able to learn on their own and what they can potentially achieve with help or assistance (Bowles et al., 2018; Shabani, 2016)

Vygotsky theorized that children's actions occur in response to other actions. For example, in a classroom, children will "actively seek out, and respond to, a variety of social and physical contexts" (Miller, 2011, p. 192). The practice of inclusion supports Vygotsky's theory by placing students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers in a general education setting. By interacting with advanced peers, children with disabilities will develop socially and construct

knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). They will model behaviors and actions and therefore acquire the social skills needed (Miller, 2011).

Correlation of Theories to the Research

The practice of inclusion provides students with disabilities opportunities to interact and engage with their non-disabled peers. Through observation, interaction, and engagement with their peers, students gain acceptance and knowledge. For students with disabilities to become independent learners and gain appropriate social skills, inclusion is an essential tool (Avcioglu, 2016; Bossaert et al., 2015). Furthermore, it is essential that children with disabilities feel socially and academically accepted to fulfill the sense of belonging in the safety level of the hierarchy of needs and move towards self-actualization to feel self-motivated and have high self-esteem (Parkay et al., 2014). From the information Maslow provided for reaching self-actualization, inclusion is a factor that can help students with disabilities not feel isolated due to their disability, but instead, included in the general education classroom with their peers. Overall, when schools implement Maslow's hierarchy of needs to support students that experience academic difficulty, academic performance improves (Fisher & Crawford, 2020). Students with disabilities have opportunities to engage and learn from their peers in an inclusion classroom, which follows Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Throughout the study, these theoretical frameworks will guide the study providing information that correlates the theories to the practice of inclusion.

Related Literature

The related literature begins with an overview of the reformation of special education and the path to inclusion. Furthermore, definitions and descriptions of inclusion are provided in the related literature. A great deal of literature exists on educators' perceptions of the experience of

teaching students with disabilities in an inclusive classroom. However, there is a limited amount of research on the lived experiences of students with disabilities regarding the practice of inclusion.

Inclusion

In the 1950s and 1960s, students with disabilities were not educated alongside their non-disabled peers. Instead, they were either institutionalized or kept at home. Public Laws 94-142 and Public Law 99-457 provided students from ages 3 to 21 and from the ages of birth to 3 the rights and access to a public and free, appropriate public education (FAPE). The public and free appropriate education were to be provided in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Hartman, Wang, Francisco, & Patricia, 2020; Zhang & Hu, 2015). The Regular Education Initiative Act was passed in the 1980s, requiring more of an amalgamation with non-disabled students and students with disabilities due to years of intentionally separating students with disabilities from students in the general education classrooms (Dieker & Hines, 2014).

As years passed, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) was passed (IDEA, 2004). IDEA (2004) required students with disabilities to access the curriculum within a general education classroom. In addition to having access to the general education curriculum, IDEA stipulates the practice of inclusion for academic purposes and social interaction, enhancing social interaction among students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers (Avcioğlu, 2016; Bossaert et al., 2015; Dieker & Hines, 2014; Kart & Kart, 2021). Not only does IDEA (2004) require students have access to the general education curriculum, but it also requires schools to be held accountable academically for all students, including students with disabilities (Mackey, 2014; Shogren et al., 2015). In addition, teachers expose students with disabilities to the rigorous curriculum, and they are accountable for demonstrating the mastery of the material they have learned throughout the academic year (Shogren et al., 2015).

Students with disabilities receiving instruction in inclusion classrooms are held accountable for the state-mandated tests given at the end of the academic year (Mackey, 2014).

Inclusion is a concept that has a plethora of descriptions and meanings (Hodkinson, 2020; Taub & Foster, 2020). However, specific descriptions and characteristics of inclusion prevail when describing the practice within education. Inclusion is described as placing students with disabilities in the general education classroom with students without disabilities, giving students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum to the maximum extent possible with accommodations and support according to the student's Individualized Education Plan (Agoratus, 2020; Avcioglu, 2016; Bossaert et al., 2015; Dieker & Hines, 2014; Hodkinson, 2020; Mackey, 2014; Saloviita & Conseganti, 2019). The practice of inclusion allows a diverse group of learners similar opportunities for academic engagement and learning with their mainstreamed peers (Hartman et al., 2020). Inclusive classrooms can create meaningful learning opportunities within an environment that provides support for the students and promotes a sense of belonging for all students (Taub & Foster, 2020; Overton et al., 2017). A sense of belonging includes how the individual with a disability views him or herself belonging in a particular group, how comfortable the individual feels with others, the relationships the individual makes, which includes friendships and intimate relationships, and the sense of belonging to a community (Strnadova et al., 2018). The practice of inclusion is vested in social justice and provides opportunities for students to reach their full potential (Calder-Stegemann & Jaciw, 2018). Social acceptance and academic achievement go hand in hand when describing inclusion (Benstead, 2019; Cullinane, 2020). Inclusion is an ideological commitment for equality for children with disabilities, emphasizing the child's needs to determine the best environment for learning and socialization (Chong, 2018). Academic learning and social inclusion are linked when a student

experiences social inclusion; academic achievement is likely to increase (Benstead, 2019; Cullinane, 2020). The purpose of inclusion is to provide children with disabilities opportunities to engage in learning communities that value their uniqueness. The practice of inclusion considers the placement and service of students with disabilities and the best environment for them with their non-disabled peers. Furthermore, the aim of inclusion is to promote acceptance of others and opportunities to build friendships. The focus of inclusion is not only to promote academic learning and but also to strengthen the children with disabilities participation and social interaction with their non-disabled peers and their teachers (Beneke et al., 2019; Cullinan, 2017; Taub & Foster, 2020; Overton et al., 2017). Furthermore, the practice of inclusion reinforces acceptance, reduces fear, hostility, and prejudice of students with disabilities (Kart & Kart, 2021). Inclusion embraces valuing differences and recognizing diversity.

Inclusion is unpredictable and requires flexibility on the part of the teachers and the students (Abawi, 2015; Smith, 2019). Inclusion is about integrating students with disabilities into a general education classroom to access academics and socialization, empowering students to succeed, and providing the necessary support to help them develop self-efficacy (Abawi, 2015). Effective inclusive practices reduce prejudices among students, making the school environment appropriate for students with and without disabilities, mutually benefiting students with and without disabilities (Agoratus, 2020; McMurray & Thompson, 2016). The idea of inclusion acknowledges and responds to the uniqueness of individuals and focuses on the strengths of children rather than the weaknesses, making all students a priority of academic success and social integration (Beneke et al., 2019; Chong, 2018; Overton et al., 2017). The practice of inclusion provides students with disabilities opportunities to engage socially with their non-disabled peers, providing students with and without disabilities learning experiences and lessons

of acceptance, therefore, leading to social, cognitive, and academic benefits for students with and without disabilities (Beneke et al., 2019; Ferreira & Makinen, 2017; Young, 2018). Inclusion has little to no meaning if students with disabilities are not academically successful; therefore, students with disabilities are unlikely to achieve success if they do not feel included (Benstead, 2019). Inclusion is contingent upon the educators, administrators, and resources in which inclusion takes place, and all children should feel valued, respected, and have a sense of belonging (Benstead, 2019; Smith, 2019).

Over the years, the practice of inclusion has evolved. Integrating students with special needs into an environment, including students without disabilities, has progressed from the years of institutionalizing individuals due to a disability. According to the Institute on Disability/UCED, 7.3% of children that range between the ages of 5 to 17 have a disability (“Opening Doors: Exploring Access for People with Disabilities,” 2020). More than 60% of students with disabilities spend 80% or more of their time in a general education classroom in proximity to their non-disabled peers (Hott et al., 2017; Giangreco, 2020; Gilmour, 2018; Wexler, 2016; Zhang & Hu, 2015). With inclusion, students with disabilities are now included in general education classrooms with their non-disabled peers to the greatest extent possible for learning and socialization (Ferreira & Makinen, 2017; Kirby, 2017). The decision is made as to how a classroom can accommodate and help students with disabilities grow academically and socially for a wide range of diverse learners (Giangreco, 2020). Inclusion is also described as recognizing the class as a whole and working toward including all students, not just toward students with a disability, and promoting the sense of belonging to a community and society (Coakley-Fields, 2018; Strnadova et al., 2018). Integrating students with disabilities and without disabilities into classrooms provides them with educational opportunities and cultivates

belongingness and nurturing (Ferreira & Makinen, 2017; Mu, 2015). Providing students with disabilities opportunities for engagement with peers their age and a sense of belonging drives the students with disabilities' motivation to achieve success (Benstead, 2019; Cullinane, 2020; London & Ingram, 2018). Furthermore, classrooms of inclusion benefit both students with and students without disabilities. Inclusion classrooms embrace diversity and work to reduce fears of human differences. Feelings of acceptance, compassion, and empathy increase, and acceptance occur among students when inclusion is facilitated correctly (Giangreco, 2020). Schools are the gateway to the future of inclusion, creating an atmosphere of acceptance among individuals with disabilities or other factors such as race, poverty, or gender (Wexler, 2016). As teachers plan for students, their feelings and descriptions about disabilities are embedded into the curriculum. Educators that are proactive and accepting of inclusion create meaningful experiences for students with and without disabilities, not only with academics but also with the social experiences for all of the children (Ferreira & Makinen, 2017; Midgen, Theodoratou, Newbury, & Leonard, 2019; Wexler, 2016).

Establishing and modeling positive relationships with students with disabilities and with non-disabled students promotes positive experiences within inclusive classrooms and within the school, therefore promoting a sense of belonging (Ferreira & Makinen, 2017; Midgen et al., 2019). Furthermore, involvement beyond the typical school day, such as extracurricular activities, is vital in fostering acceptance for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities who experience a sense of belonging with their non-disabled peers and their teachers are more likely to have positive outcomes in academic areas and social engagements with others (Midgen et al., 2019; Silveira-Zaldivar & Curtis, 2019; Trent, 2020). The implementation of inclusion depends on the attitudes and perceptions of the teachers and administration (Ferreira & Makinen,

2017; Trent, 2020; Wexler, 2016). Educators that create inclusive classrooms acknowledge and embody the commitment of educating students with and without disabilities and the importance of social justice for students with disabilities (Chong, 2018).

IDEA mandates that students with disabilities be educated in a general education classroom unless the students' behavioral and academic needs cannot be met. Students with disabilities that have been integrated into a classroom with their non-disabled peers have scored higher in areas such as reading. The students with disabilities who scored higher spent most of the school day in a general education class. These students spent 75% of their day in a general education setting and received higher reading scores than their peers that had only spent 25% of the school day in a general education setting (Gilmour, 2018). Furthermore, students with disabilities who spent most of the school day in a general education setting graduated on time and enrolled in a college. Students with disabilities placed in a more restrictive environment for learning did report having the same outcome of graduating on time or enrolling in a college (Gilmour, 2018).

Although IDEA mandates that students with disabilities receiving academic instruction in a general education setting, an IEP team consisting of parents, special education teachers, general education teachers, and possibly the student makes the decisions regarding services provided to students with learning disabilities (Gilmour, 2018). Sufficient evidence from completed research confirms that students with disabilities experience better academic and social outcomes when they participate in an inclusion setting and have access to the general education curriculum with their non-disabled peers (Gilmour, 2018; Silveira-Zaldivar & Curtis, 2019; Kart & Kart, 2021).

The purpose of inclusion is to expose students with disabilities to the general education curriculum and provide opportunities for students with disabilities to participate fully and engage

in all educational opportunities, therefore becoming valued and integral members of the school community (Mu, 2015). Inclusion should be meaningful, not only do students with disabilities have access to the curriculum, but they are actively involved in the learning process (Stelitano, Russell, & Bray, 2020). The practice of inclusion should promote a sense of belonging for all students and be authentic. Inclusion should be implanted school-wide, not just within a classroom. Stating that a school provides inclusive classrooms is not genuinely accurate; the actual practice of inclusion applies to the school (Midgen et al., 2019; Thompson & Timmons, 2017). Authentic, inclusive schools provide opportunities for students with disabilities in the classroom and throughout the school. Students with disabilities should experience multiple opportunities to engage and learn with their same-aged peers outside of the classroom (Midgen et al., 2019; Thompson & Timmons, 2017).

Lawmakers and educators have implemented the practice of inclusion to benefit students with disabilities by integrating students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers for social and academic growth; however, in some public schools, the result of inclusion has created invisible barriers. Students with disabilities may experience a sense of not belonging, which is the opposite of the goal of inclusion (Wexler, 2016). The language of inclusion is imperative when deciding the appropriate setting for students with disabilities. A sense of school connectedness should be implemented. School connected refers to the belief and perception of the students that their teachers and their peers care about them and their learning (London & Ingram, 2018). Referring to students with disabilities as the inclusion kids or other derogatory terms creates barriers in inclusion that hinder the purpose of inclusion and promote social isolation for students with disabilities (London & Ingram, 2018). Additionally, the results of inclusive practices are impacted by several factors, such as class size and structure, the overall

school environment and attitude about acceptance of diversity (Overton, Wrench, & Garrett, 2017). The practice of inclusion is dependent upon several crucial variables, including the acceptance of inclusion among administrators, teachers, and students, the understanding of inclusion, and equity for all students (Overton, Wrench, & Garrett, 2017; Wexler, 2016).

Effective Inclusive Classrooms

Various factors are imperative for an effective inclusive classroom. Attitude, strong leadership, effective training, and willingness are examples of crucial components needed to implement inclusion successfully (Kwon, Hong, Jeon, 2017; McMurray & Thompson, 2016). The central factor for the successful implementation of inclusion is the attitude of the teacher and the teacher's belief that all children are capable of learning (Donnelly et al., 2019). The teachers reflect their attitude in the atmosphere of the classroom. Therefore, if a teacher embraces inclusion and models effective techniques to all students in the classroom that demonstrates compassion, kindness, and acceptance, other students will begin to model those behaviors (Austin, 2016; Kwon et al., 2017; McMurray & Ross, 2016). In addition, implementing a classroom atmosphere of acknowledging strengths and weaknesses, respect, and responsibility facilitates social acceptance and learning in the classroom for students with and without disabilities (Donnelly et al., 2019; McMurray & Ross, 2016).

In addition to the teacher's attitude, the attitude and leadership of the administration demonstrating investment in all students' success and support to the teachers is an essential factor for inclusive classrooms (Boyle & Hernandez, 2016; Donnelly et al., 2019; Murphy, 2018; Sider, Maich, & Morvan, 2017). Principals and assistant principals are important stakeholders in the practice of inclusion. They are instrumental and responsible for ensuring success with the practice of inclusion by providing positive support and demonstrating their knowledge of

inclusion (Boyle & Hernandez, 2016; Donnelly et al., 2019; Murphy, 2018; Rix, 2020; Sider et al., 2017). Principals who display a positive attitude and support inclusion are more likely to decide the best placement for students with disabilities is in the least restrictive environment, providing the students with opportunities to engage with other students socially and learn (Boyle & Hernandez, 2016; Murphy, 2018; Rix, 2020; Sider et al., 2017). Positive experiences between principals and students with disabilities lead to positive attitudes and outcomes for teachers and students (Boyle & Hernandez, 2016). Also, providing teachers with the needed skills, appropriate training, and knowledge demonstrates consistent support from the administration and increases the teacher's self-efficacy (Kwon et al., 2017; Sider et al., 2017). Due to the increasing number of inclusive classrooms, providing opportunities for teachers to collaborate and learn new strategies and techniques to help students learn is imperative for a successful inclusive classroom (Austin, 2016; Kwon et al., 2017). Furthermore, teachers must be willing and flexible when considering different approaches to learning. Allowing students to use various multi-sensory approaches to learning encourages participation and increases confidence among students with disabilities (Gumpert & McConnell, 2019). The atmosphere of the inclusive classroom establishes the tone for students with disabilities. The administrator and teacher are instrumental in establishing a positive, caring, and compassionate atmosphere for social and learning success for students with disabilities (Austin, 2016; Gumpert & McConnell, 2019; Kwon et al., 2017). Teaching has been referred to as an art, a science, and a craft, consisting of a plethora of factors essential for students' success and sense of belonging in an inclusive classroom (Austin, 2016).

Teacher Perception of Inclusion

One of the critical factors of the viability of an inclusion classroom is the attitude and perception of the teacher towards teaching students with disabilities (Avcioglu, 2016; Donnelly

et al., 2019; Dovigo, 2020; Ferreira & Makinen, 2017). Urton et al. (2014) described the teacher's attitude as the key factor in the teacher's perception of inclusion. The teacher is the most significant factor in promoting a nurturing and positive atmosphere for learning for students with and without disabilities (Avcioglu, 2016; Benstead, 2019; Kirby, 2017). Positive interactions among the students with disabilities and the teachers are the building blocks to developing other social relationships in the classroom (Benstead, 2019; Ozokcu, 2018). Students that observe positive interactions between the teacher and students with disabilities model these behaviors in the classroom (Ozokcu, 2018). The interaction and communication style of the teacher with students with disabilities determines the atmosphere of the inclusion classroom (Avcioglu, 2016). Furthermore, teachers that demonstrate a positive attitude towards inclusion also believe in the positive effects of co-teaching; which includes viewing the special education teacher as an equal partner in the classroom (Gilmour, 2018; Hackett, Kruzich, Goulter, & Battista, 2020; Strogilos & Avramidis, 2016) . General education teachers have stated that they feel prepared to teach students with disabilities if they have extra support from special education teachers or paraprofessionals and if the student does not have a behavior that would impede their learning. General education teachers also explained that if they can collaborate with the special education teacher and work together, they can promote an encouraging and accepting atmosphere for inclusion (Gilmour, 2018; Strogilos & Avramidis, 2016).

The positivity of the general education teacher and special education teacher directly affects academic success and the social acceptance of the students with disabilities (Strogilos & Avramidis, 2016). Educators with a positive attitude toward teaching students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers lead the classroom with high expectations and support for all students. Overall, students report feeling a sense of satisfaction academically and socially when

the teacher demonstrates a positive attitude (Midgen et al., 2019). If general education teachers accept teaching students with disabilities and adjust their teaching style to using evidence-based strategies and collaborate with the special education teachers, they will promote a positive attitude toward inclusion (Mu, 2015; Silveira-Zaldivar & Curtis, 2019; Urton et al., 2014). In addition, students with disabilities will feel accepted by their teachers and motivated academically (Midgen et al., 2019; Mu, 2015; Urton et al., 2014). In addition, the general education teacher will organize the classroom and the students within the classroom accordingly and not because of labels or disabilities (Wexler, 2016).

Teachers who have a positive attitude toward inclusion usually have a strong belief in their teaching ability. They view students with disabilities as no different from other students in their classroom (Midgen et al., 2019; Urton et al., 2014). General education teachers who have taught students with disabilities in an inclusion class have stated that this type of educational setting has improved their instructional preparation and teaching style (Mackey, 2014). The role of teacher self-efficacy in teaching students with disabilities is a determining factor in a positive attitude toward inclusion. Teachers that have had sufficient and continuous training on strategies and practices for inclusive classrooms are more favorable toward the idea of inclusion (Ferreira & Makinen, 2017). Also, the majority of teachers with positive attitudes are flexible to differentiating instruction to meet the needs of the students, and they collaborate with the administration and special education teachers to provide effective instruction (Urton et al., 2014). They believe that all students can learn and that high expectations should be set for students with and without disabilities. In addition, general education teachers stated that providing a lesson with structure benefits all every student, including students with disabilities and non-disabled students (Mackey, 2014). In inclusion classrooms, general education teachers have used various

teaching materials to provide differentiation, providing opportunities for all learners (Mackey, 2014).

Positive attitudes from the teachers, staff, and administration lead to support, and therefore, teachers are more confident with teaching classes of diversity. When considering the components of inclusion that make it a successful practice, the teacher is the most significant factor in fostering a positive environment for inclusion (Avcioglu, 2016; Overton, Wrench, & Garrett, 2017).

Stites, Rakes, Noggle, and Shah (2018) stated that providing preservice teachers with high-quality preparation helps build self-efficacy and therefore fosters positive attitudes toward teaching students with disabilities. It is imperative to begin early with providing the necessary support and training for teaching students with disabilities to help preservice teachers build self-efficacy and therefore demonstrate positive attitudes toward the practice of inclusion (Stites et al., 2018). As teachers demonstrate positive attitudes and self-efficacy, the students with disabilities will be more willing to engage and participate in the class with their non-disabled peers (Urton et al., 2014). For teachers to have a strong sense of self-efficacy needed to teach an inclusive classroom, the teachers must be confident in their ability to teach and cope with difficult situations that could occur in the classroom. As teaching an inclusion classroom continues, providing more training, professional development, and giving more support are a few of the ways to increase positive attitudes of educators that teach inclusion classrooms (Stites et al., 2018; Urton et al., 2014). Stites et al. (2018) stated that for inclusion to be effective and successful, teachers need to have a favorable view of inclusion, demonstrating positive attitudes in the inclusion classroom.

General education teachers who demonstrate a sense of self-efficacy when teaching students with disabilities in an inclusive setting have structured classrooms. They implement evidence-based practices for academic and social skills (Silveira-Zaldivar & Curtis, 2019). Evidence-based practices (EBPs) are required for students with disabilities described by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (Hughes, Powell, Lembke, & Riley-Tillman, 2016; Johnsen, 2020). According to IDEA, the use of evidence-based practices is necessary and essential to enhance learning opportunities for students with disabilities (Johnsen, 2020). EBPs are interventions based on research and have been rigorously tested to ensure students are provided with interventions and practices that have proven effective with both social and academic learning and result in positive student outcomes (Cook & Cook, 2016; Martin, Spooner, & Singer, 2017; Russo-Campisi, 2017). Furthermore EBPs incorporates the values and goals of the students (Cook & Cook, 2016). The use of EBPs, such as providing explicit instruction, active supervision such as monitoring student progress and providing immediate feedback provide students with disabilities along with students without disabilities opportunities to engage academically and learn the material (Allen et al., 2020; Archer & Hughes, 2011; Foraker, 2020; Weiss & Rodgers, 2020). In addition, other EBP such as scaffolding the content, peer- assisted learning strategies or peer mentoring resulted with positive effects on students with and without disabilities (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Foraker, 2020; Solomont, 2020; Weiss & Rodgers, 2020). Using EBPs with students with disabilities and students who struggle academically can reduce the achievement gap and increase learning (Hughes et al., 2016; Foraker, 2020). The use of EBPs allows students with disabilities the opportunity to master the same rigorous standards-based content as their non-disabled peers (Hott et al., 2017). Therefore, providing them with the same opportunities to compete academically as their peers in the

classroom (Hott et al., 2017). Academically, educators can use various EBPs during instruction, including visual supports, peer-mediated instruction, and help students with self-management (Asaro-Saddler, 2016; Foraker, 2020). Providing quality instruction, such as establishing clear standards and expectations and the use of EBPs compliments inclusion; the two are lockstep and benefit all students in the classroom (Giangreco, 2020); Solomont, 2020). In addition, the use of EBPs such as modeling best practices, peer mentoring, peer-assisted learning, and collaborative reading strategies encourages a sense of belonging for struggling students and students with disabilities (D'Amico, 2020; Foraker, 2020).

Evidence-based strategies or practices (EBP) that have been implemented in inclusion classrooms promote learning success and social success among students with and without disabilities. These EBPs involve peer interactions by providing students with disabilities with social skills training or social narratives to help them interact with their non-disabled peers (Silveira-Zaldivar & Curtis, 2019; Williamson et al., 2019). For general education teachers to provide these practices with fidelity, training or professional development and resources should be offered to the general education teachers (Abawi, 2015; Russo-Capisi, 2017; Silveira-Zaldivar, 2019). When implementing EBPs, the general education teacher should implement evidence-based practices with fidelity but also with flexibility. Teachers should provide explicit teaching of content and social skills. The content should provide repetition, and the teacher should provide modeling (Abawi, 2015). The general education teacher should be flexible with the EBPs implementing modifications and accommodations to help students with disabilities (Holt et al., 2017; Russo-Campisi, 2017). General education teachers that have been provided with training on how to accommodate diverse learners gain more confidence and have a higher sense of self-efficacy when teaching students with disabilities (Ferreira & Mankinen, 2017).

When researchers asked students with disabilities about inclusion classrooms, the students explained that it is not the location of instruction that impacts their positive engagement and academic success. However, instead, it was the quality of instruction provided by the general education teacher and the ability to implement diverse learning strategies to enhance and encourage academic success and growth (An & Meany, 2015; Banks, 2017). Suppose general education teachers view a disability as a label, assigning a preconceived perception that the student cannot learn. In that case, the teacher tends to place the students with disabilities into specific categories, hindering their abilities and strengths (Arishi et al., 2017). However, general education teachers who have taken the time to view the IEP of the student, learn about the student's disability, and not label the student have reported success with teaching students with disabilities. They felt it was crucial to know the information and prepare a plan of accommodations. In addition, general education teachers reported that they actively engage with the students before the class to begin forming relationships (An & Meaney, 2015). Furthermore, general education teachers have reported having successful classrooms because they have connected their knowledge of special education and their behaviors toward students with disabilities (An & Meaney, 2015). Some students with disabilities explained that there would not be learning disabilities among students if the teachers provided a variety of learning and different ways of teaching (Banks, 2017).

Although some teachers have a positive outlook on teaching inclusion, several teachers do not feel confident in their ability to teach students with disabilities and provide effective classroom management for students with disabilities. This lack of confidence is demonstrated in the way they behave toward students with disabilities. Teachers reported feeling less favorable toward teaching students with disabilities because of the significant levels of disabilities within

the classroom (Ewing, Monsen, & Kielblock, 2018). In a study completed by Avcioglu (2016), although teachers reported they treated students with disabilities the same as their non-disabled peers, the behaviors were different from students without disabilities. The teachers used more humor, displayed more eye contact, and supported students without disabilities (Avcioglu, 2016). The teachers do not recognize or confront their disconsciousness and feelings toward inclusion (Wexler, 2016). Although the general education teachers were not cognizant of treating students with disabilities differently, teachers manifested these behaviors during observations (Avcioglu, 2016). Many of the feelings toward inclusion from teachers are embedded in their ideological systems, influencing the culture they create within the classroom. Due to the labeling of students or automatically referring to the students as the inclusion kids, teachers' expectations are lowered, limiting students' social and academic opportunities. If a teacher cannot recognize these negative feelings toward inclusion, over time, the culture created in the classroom will reflect the teacher's attitude toward inclusion (Wexler, 2016).

However, other teachers have reported having negative attitudes due to the behaviors that students demonstrated with disabilities in the classroom (Ewing et al., 2018). Antagonistic actions of the general education teacher can affect other students' decisions to engage with children with disabilities. Students with disabilities who were being disruptive and causing friction with other students caused teachers to have a negative attitude toward the practice of inclusion (Ewing et al., 2018; McMurray & Thompson, 2016). The students with disabilities that were less cohesive with the other students in the class impacted the teacher's attitude and, therefore, not favoring teaching an inclusive classroom (Ewing et al., 2018). The relationships of peers within the classroom are an essential factor for the success of inclusion; therefore,

behaviors exhibited that are disruptive cause not only negative feelings for teachers in an inclusion classroom but also for other students within the classroom (Wexler, 2016).

Another factor that influences teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and indicates negative feelings towards inclusion is self-efficacy. Stites et al. (2018) reported that a teacher's beliefs about his or her self-efficacy form within the early years of teaching. If teachers do not feel prepared for teaching students with disabilities, they will lack self-efficacy, therefore, affecting the atmosphere of the classroom (Stites et al., 2018; Young, 2018). When teachers feel poorly prepared for teaching students with disabilities in an inclusion classroom, then feeling of tension can evolve between the teacher and the students with disabilities, causing resentment from the students with and without disabilities (Young, 2018). Teachers who have a negative attitude toward teaching students with disabilities do not have a high sense of self-efficacy. As a result, they do not feel prepared to meet the needs of students with disabilities (Urton et al., 2014). Many general education teachers feel they lack adequate training in behavior management, curriculum development, and strategies for teaching students with special needs in an inclusive classroom (Young, 2018). In addition, general education teachers responsible for teaching an inclusion classroom expressed the concern that they did not have adequate time to plan and co-plan with a special education teacher (Mackey, 2014). Furthermore, general education teachers stated they do not feel they receive the necessary support from the administration or the special education teacher to prepare lessons for students with disabilities (Mackey, 2014).

Other factors that influenced teachers' attitudes about teaching inclusion classes include the amount of professional development on related topics for students with disabilities and issues with classroom management (Gilmour, 2018; Mackey, 2014). These factors caused general education teachers to feel negative toward teaching an inclusion classroom and hindered their

feeling of self-efficacy. General education teachers stated they did not receive adequate training through in-service or professional development to teach students with disabilities. They felt that they needed more information on effective strategies to teach students with disabilities in a general education setting. The teachers' levels of experience with educating students with disabilities influence their attitudes (McMurray & Thompson, 2016). Furthermore, general education teachers explained that with classrooms consisting of students with disabilities and non-disabled students, they spent more time on classroom management than on providing instruction, therefore, negatively affecting their attitude toward the practice of inclusion (McMurray & Thompson, 2016; Gilmour, 2018; Mackey, 2014).

Due to the many factors that have caused teachers to have a negative outlook on teaching students with disabilities, teacher turnover has increased among teachers that have been assigned to teach students with disabilities (Gilmour, 2018). General education teachers have stated that they are overwhelmed with providing instruction to students with disabilities. As stated previously, general education teachers felt they had not received adequate training and support, and they are spending too much time with issues of discipline rather than providing instruction to the students (Gilmour, 2018; Mackey, 2014). In order to promote the practice of inclusion and provide a positive learning and social environments for students with disabilities, teachers and staff have to be trained and equipped with strategies and techniques to help cope with difficult situations that could arise in an inclusion classroom (McMurray & Thompson, 2016; Strogilos & Avramidis, 2016). Factors such as effective teaching strategies, preparation programs, evidence-based instruction, and the belief in abolishing labels of children with disabilities promote positive attitudes and will enhance the practice of inclusion (Kirby, 2017).

The attitude and perception of general education teachers, whether positive or negative, set the atmosphere or environment for students with disabilities in an inclusion classroom. Teachers are the critical component to the success and viability of an inclusion classroom (Avcioglu, 2016; McMurray & Thompson, 2016; Urton et al., 2014). The attitude of the general education teacher promotes a cause-and-effect relationship with the students with disabilities and without disabilities. If a general education teacher has a positive attitude and a high sense of self-efficacy, the classroom atmosphere will be accepting, nurturing, and promote academic and social success. General education teachers who are respected and admired by the students with and without disabilities can positively influence the students. The result of this positive influence includes positive behaviors from the students with disabilities and the students without disabilities. Also, students that respect and admire their teacher will interact positively with each other, including both students with and without disabilities. Overall, these positive interactions will also result in active classroom management and affect the students' social behaviors (Avcioglu, 2016). When interactions among students and teachers are positive, all students, including students with disabilities and students without disabilities, can benefit both academically and socially from an inclusion classroom (Shogren et al., 2015).

However, if the teacher lacks a sense of self-efficacy, feels unprepared and overwhelmed, this will hinder the social and academic success of students with disabilities (Avicoglu 2016; Urton et al. 2014). Therefore, the attitude of the teachers on providing a nurturing and accepting environment for students with disabilities correlates to positive student behavior. In addition, the teacher's positive attitude providing compassion, nurture, and acceptance correlates to the hierarchy of needs by Maslow. Therefore, teachers are an essential factor in providing a

nurturing classroom environment to help students with disabilities feel safe and accepted, helping to fulfill one of the levels of the hierarchy of needs by Maslow (Parkay et al., 2014).

Students with Disabilities Perceptions of Inclusion

Although there has been a significant amount of research on the perception of general education teachers toward teaching an inclusion classroom, there has been limited research that examines the relationships of students with disabilities with their teachers and peers in an inclusion classroom (Gilmour, 2018). Shaw (2017) stated that if educational policy continues with consisting of inclusion, the view of students with disabilities must be considered because students with disabilities are the key stakeholders in the practice of inclusion. Researchers have conducted studies have on the teachers' perceptions of inclusion. Most of the attention has been focused on the issues general education teachers face when teaching students with disabilities. However, not much research has been completed on the lived experiences of students with disabilities in an inclusion classroom, providing their interpretations of social acceptance and academic success in a general education classroom with their non-disabled peers (Rose & Shevlin 2017). When considering the effectiveness of the practice of inclusion, a critical factor in evaluating the success of inclusion is the perspectives of children with disabilities (Cullinan, 2017). Rose and Shevlin (2017) stated that interviewing students with disabilities and helping them make use of their voices is an essential factor in getting their perception of the practice of inclusion. In addition, Rose and Shevlin (2017) explained that the voices of students with disabilities are essential, and students with disabilities have a great deal to say and share about their experiences in an inclusion classroom.

In an inclusion classroom, when students with disabilities feel accepted by their peers that do not have a disability, significant opportunities for emotional, social, academic, and intellectual

development for the student with disabilities can occur (Avcioglu, 2016). However, several factors influence the academic and social acceptance of students with disabilities in an inclusion classroom with their non-disabled peers. One of the factors that influence the social acceptance of students with disabilities is the type of disability. For example, students with autism have reported having difficulty feeling accepted in an inclusion classroom by their peers (Cullinan, 2017). Students with autism reported feeling lonely and unaccepted by their peers. They felt a sense of isolation within the classroom. (Cullinan, 2017; Tomlinson, 2020). Although they were in an inclusion environment, they did not feel as if they were fully included in this setting with their non-disabled peers. Students with autism reported that although they tried to make friends, they did not feel this was reciprocated by the non-disabled students in the classroom (Cullinan 2017; Tomlinson, 2020). A case study on female students with emotional-behavior disorder (EBD) was conducted. The females reported that it was difficult to make friends and socially interact in the general education classrooms (Whitlow, Cooper, & Couvillon, 2019). The participants indicated they wanted to participate in the general education classroom with their peers. However, they did not feel entirely accepted by their peers and general education teachers. Several female participants described that the only connection they had was with an adult who was a special education teacher (Whitlow et al., 2019).

Acceptance from students without disabilities plays a significant role in the success of inclusion from the perspective of students with disabilities (Bossaert, 2015; Cullinan, 2017; Whitburn, 2017). In some inclusion classrooms, social acceptance, such as establishing friendships, is how students with disabilities measure normalcy (Whitburn, 2017). According to a group of students with disabilities from Spain, they felt the primary indicator of feeling included was establishing friendships with other students who may or may not have a disability.

In addition, their sense of normalcy or feeling included was also dependent upon the relationships they established with their teachers (Whitburn, 2017). All students desire a sense of belonging and relationships with other students in the classroom. Participating in group work, engaging with other students, and establishing friendships are characteristics that create a sense of belonging for students with disabilities (Midgen, Theodoratou, Newbury, & Leonard, 2019). Students with autism reported feeling excluded by their peers in inclusion classrooms. However, other students with special needs, such as students with learning disabilities, have reported experiencing higher rejection levels from their classmates (Nepi, Fioravanti, Nannini, & Peru, 2015). Although students with disabilities are included in the classroom activities and integrated into groups to work with peers, the contact is not meaningful. Therefore, students with disabilities described feelings of rejection from students without disabilities (Pinto, Baines, & Bakopoulou, 2019). In different classrooms that consist of students with and without disabilities, students with an intellectual disability feel that their classmates do not socially accept them. They reported that social acceptance and the feeling of being integrated into a classroom with general education students were low (Beaulieu-Bergeron & Morin, 2016). Students with learning disabilities reported feelings of social exclusion in an inclusion classroom, but students with behavioral problems have stated that they do not feel socially accepted by students without disabilities in the classroom. Common themes of loneliness, lack of friends, and social isolation were found among students with disabilities such as autism, learning disabilities, behavioral disabilities, and intellectual disabilities (Cullinan, 2017; Beaulieu-Bergeron & Morin, 2016; Nepi et al., 2015; Tomlinson, 2020). Also, students with disabilities are prone to be victims of bullies. Moreover, students with disabilities expressed that they did not feel strongly about being a part

of the school beyond just participating in an inclusion classroom (McMurray & Thompson, 2016; Nepi et al., 2015).

Some children without disabilities have negative attitudes toward students with disabilities, especially students with intellectual disabilities, causing low social integration due to a lack of acceptance and friendships (Beaulieu-Bergeron & Morin, 2016). Common themes from students without disabilities about their peers that have a disability included feelings that students with disabilities get more attention from the teacher and their work is easier. In addition, the students without disabilities stated that their peers with disabilities were too different, and it was not cool to hang out with them. The students without disabilities also stated that some of their peers with disabilities look and act differently, and therefore, they did not like to hang out with them (Nowicki, Brown, & Dare, 2018). In other situations, instead of forming friendships, students without disabilities reported feeling a sense of responsibility to help or be friendly to students with intellectual disabilities. Additionally, although several students did not view students with disabilities as different than other students, some students within the study reported feeling a sense of pity or sorry for the students with intellectual disabilities, therefore displaying negative emotions towards the students with intellectual disabilities (Beaulieu-Bergeron & Morin, 2016). Most of the instances that include students with disabilities feeling social isolation are due to the lack of knowledge of disabilities and how to interact with students with disabilities (Nowicki et al., 2018). Therefore, students with disabilities that do not feel accepted by their non-disabled peers will not only carry these scars of feeling unaccepted during the school years but possibly for the rest of their life (Avcioglu, 2016).

Another factor that influences the perception of students with disabilities is the setting, which includes the delivery of instruction to students with disabilities. Several teaching styles

exist with general and special education teachers, such as parallel teaching, station teaching, alternative teaching, lead, support, or team teaching. In inclusion classrooms, co-teaching is a method used, and it is linked to positive teacher and pupil experiences (Casserly & Padden, 2018). Although the co-teaching model with a general education teacher and special education teacher is commonly used and proven to be effective, the dominant model of intervention used is withdrawing struggling students from the general education classroom for individual or small group support (Casserly & Padden, 2018). In some classrooms, students with disabilities are taken to a small group setting to help with focus and attention (Casserly & Padden, 2018; Dieker & Hines, 2014). Several students with disabilities from Australia were interviewed about what makes inclusion successful for them, and they reported that receiving the same instruction as their peers made them feel included. One student explained that she would rather receive the rigorous content in the classroom alongside her non-disabled peers and make lower grades rather than be pulled out to receive instruction or her assignments modified from the original content (Whitburn, 2017). In addition, students with disabilities that were interviewed about their perception of inclusion reported that when they are exempt from standardized testing to protect the school's academic standing, they felt this was not true inclusion, and they expressed that they should be included in the test-taking (Whitburn, 2017).

Students with disabilities have reported mixed feelings about the different deliveries of instruction. Several students with disabilities that were interviewed perceived receiving instruction in a different setting with a special education teacher for a portion of the class time as beneficial and necessary, stating that they could receive accommodations without being singled out in a general education classroom (Banks, 2017). The students with disabilities described feeling frustrated with general education teachers and the general education system because they

felt that the teachers did not provide the appropriate education to meet their diverse learning needs. The students with disabilities felt the general education teachers were less prepared with learning strategies (Banks, 2017; McMurray & Thompson, 2016). Furthermore, they felt the general education teachers would only make the content accessible to students without disabilities, therefore not using effective teaching strategies for diverse learners (Banks, 2017; McMurray & Thompson, 2016). They felt overwhelmed and frustrated in the general education classroom due to the general education teachers' pace of instruction. In addition, students with disabilities felt as if the general education teacher would draw negative attention towards them when they were off task or could not respond to questions (Banks, 2017).

Students with disabilities reported that receiving services from a special education teacher in a different setting helped them learn the material because the special education teacher was more attentive and implemented the accommodations (Banks, 2017). Also, the students described that they formed strong relationships with the special education teachers and felt as if the teachers were like second moms (Banks, 2017).

However, other students felt as if leaving the classroom for instruction in a small group setting was stigmatizing, and it would hurt their reputation (Banks, 2017; Shogren et al., 2015). In addition, these students felt as if once they left the general education classroom, it was apparent to others that they had a disability (Banks, 2017; Shogren et al., 2015). Furthermore, they explained that having a learning disability takes its toll on the students because it makes the students with a learning disability more cautious or cognizant of other students in the general education classroom noticing that they are different; therefore, they did not want attention drawn to them due to receiving necessary accommodations (Banks, 2017).

Although research has shown that students with disabilities have experienced feelings of negativity in correlation to peer acceptance and social integration, research also supports positive experiences between students with disabilities, their teachers, and their non-disabled peers regarding the practice of inclusion. The non-disabled peers in an inclusion classroom reported that interacting with students with disabilities was no different from talking or playing with any other student in the class (Beaulieu-Bergeron & Morin, 2016). When asked, children stated they are willing to accept and interact with students with disabilities and did not observe any difference (Beaulieu-Bergeron & Morin, 2016). In reference to student-teacher relationships, students with disabilities in a primary school setting stated that they felt their teacher was there to help them (Rose & Shevlin, 2017). The students with disabilities reported feeling socially accepted by their teachers. They felt as if their teachers encouraged them while working. Several students with disabilities stated that their teacher would tell them while they were working that they believed in them, and the teacher encouraged them to keep working and not give up on the task. Furthermore, students with disabilities reported that many of their general education teachers understood them and the need to provide curriculum adaptations to succeed (Tomlinson, 2020). In general education classroom settings where a general education teacher and a special education teacher co-taught, students with disabilities receive in-class support, which helped reduce the stigma of special education and increased peer support (Casserly & Padden, 2018). The students with disabilities reported feeling at ease if they had to ask for items to be repeated or for clarification on assignments; the teachers had positively responded to the students, establishing a nurturing and trusting relationship with the student (Rose & Shevlin, 2017).

Overall, students that had been mainstreamed into a general education class or in the practice of inclusion reported feeling favorable toward inclusion. The students did not feel

separated from their peers in an inclusion classroom setting (Shaw, 2017). Furthermore, the students with disabilities expressed that they did not hesitate to ask for help when they did not understand the assignment or the given work. They would ask the teacher to help, and the teacher would take her time to explain and repeat information until they understood what was expected of them for the assignment (Rose & Shevlin, 2017). The relationships with the teachers described by the students with disabilities were positive. The students with disabilities felt the teachers cared and wanted them to learn. In addition, they felt as if the general education teacher accepted them, and the students with disabilities did not feel as if they were being left behind academically compared to their non-disabled peers (Rose & Shevlin, 2017). In other instances, students with disabilities reported that they were aware they needed a little extra help in class. The students with disabilities stated that when they felt comfortable with their teachers and their peers, they would ask for help with the work. Furthermore, the students with disabilities also stated that they would receive help from their teachers, but their classmates without disabilities would offer to help with assignments during the class (Shogren et al., 2015).

Creating a sense of belonging is an essential and central factor for successful inclusion (Midgen et al., 2019). The perception of belonging is strongly connected to academic and social success within the inclusion classroom (Midgen et al., 2019; Rose & Shevlin, 2017). For students with special needs to be successful in the classroom, it is imperative to establish interpersonal relationships with the teachers and their peers. When researchers asked students with disabilities what factors made them feel like they belonged in the classroom, several factors were reported, such as feeling safe because of their teachers and their friends and feeling accepted (Midgen et al., 2019). In addition, the students explained that being involved and invited on school trips and in group work created a sense of belonging in the classroom and the

school. Participating in a nurturing classroom that provides support in learning and encourages friendships among the students with and without disabilities is another characteristic that students with disabilities described that established a sense of belonging (Midgen et al., 2019; Rose & Shevlin, 2017). When children with disabilities perceive the environment as accepting and welcoming, they experience success socially and academically (Midgen et al., 2019; Rose & Shevlin, 2017).

In an inclusion classroom setting, the views of students with disabilities are essential for inclusion to be effective (Shaw, 2017). Students with disabilities who experienced a sense of belonging and felt as if they were a part of the classroom from their teacher and peers described inclusion as a positive experience. They shared positive experiences, including ways their teachers would start the day by saying good morning or asking the students how they were. Furthermore, the students with disabilities described that their teachers had high expectations of them, and although they would help with the assignments, the teachers expected the students with disabilities to complete the work because failure was not an option at their school (Shogren et al., 2015). When in the inclusion classroom, the students with disabilities reported that although they were expected to do the same work as their non-disabled peers, they did not hesitate to ask for help when they needed it for an assignment (Rose & Shevlin, 2017).

According to students with disabilities, successful inclusion classrooms had routines, procedures, and rules such as everybody in the class are to be included, and no one will be singled out or picked on by other students. Overall, students with disabilities reported feeling generally positive about the experience of inclusion (Shaw, 2017; Shogren et al., 2015). Also, the students with disabilities described situations in which the teacher-facilitated students cooperating and working together, reinforcing the rules that everybody belongs in that class,

whether they have a disability or not (Shogren et al., 2015). In addition, strategies such as peer tutoring or pairing with a partner were used to facilitate peer relationships and acceptance among the students with disabilities and the non-disabled students. As a result, the students with disabilities reported enjoying activities where they could work with their peers and receive help from other students (Shogren et al., 2015). Thus, the practice of inclusion provided an equal society for the students and promoted acceptance between students with disabilities and students without disabilities (Shaw, 2017).

Students with and without disabilities also shared their thoughts on receiving help. Some students without disabilities stated that it would be embarrassing to have to leave the room to get help, and it was better to stay in the classroom and get help from the teacher if the student needed it (Banks, 2017; Shogren et al., 2015). The student without a disability reported that they all needed help from time to time, and the teacher was willing to help all the students and that everybody in the class was included in all the activities. (Shogren et al., 2015). In inclusion classrooms that had a paraprofessional for support, students with disabilities reported that they were not ashamed to ask them for help and that the paraprofessionals would help all the students (Shaw, 2017). Students without disabilities stated that anytime someone needed help in the class, he or she got the help he or she needed (Shaw, 2017; Shogren et al., 2015). Students in an inclusion classroom shared that being in an inclusion classroom helped them understand each other and that they are all friends in the classroom. The students with disabilities stated they preferred being in an inclusion class with their non-disabled peers, and they liked being in an inclusion class instead of being pulled out into another class to receive instruction due to difficulties in learning (Shaw, 2017; Shogren et al., 2015). The atmosphere of inclusion

increases tolerance among the students, students with and without disabilities accept each other despite their differences (Shaw, 2017).

Overall, critical factors in the success of inclusion and the feeling of belonging, according to students with disabilities, are the role of the teacher and the school. Children with disabilities explained that school plays a significant role in their experience with inclusion. Furthermore, the attitude of the general education and special education teachers affects the classroom environment (McMurray & Thompson, 2016). The teachers influence the quality of social inclusion with their upbeat attitudes according to the perceptions of children with disabilities. When educators effectively establish an atmosphere of acceptance, children with disabilities report feeling valued and part of the class (McMurray & Thompson, 2016; Midgen et al., 2019).

Summary

Descriptions and definitions of the practice of inclusion included placing students with disabilities in a general education setting with accommodations and support related to the individuals' needs according to their Individualized Education Plan, also known as providing students with disabilities with the least restrictive environment for learning (Avcioglu, 2016; Dieker & Hines, 2014; Zhang & Hu, 2015). Placing students with disabilities in an inclusion classroom provides both social and academic opportunities to students with disabilities. Students with disabilities are exposed to the general education curriculum. They are held to high expectations of learning and retaining the information of their non-disabled peers (Mackey, 2014; Midgen et al., 2019; Shogren et al., 2015). The purpose of inclusion was to eliminate the previous expectations of isolating students due to a disability. Instead of separating students with disabilities from their peers, they are educated alongside their non-disabled peers, giving them

opportunities to feel included both socially and academically (Dieker & Hines, 2014; Strogilos & Avramidis, 2016).

The practice of inclusion follows the theories of Maslow with the hierarchy of needs and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development. Maslow explained that the ultimate level in the hierarchy of needs is self-actualization, where an individual feels motivated and has high self-esteem. This level can only be reached by other levels being fulfilled. Schools play a significant role in helping students feel and achieve a level of safety (Parkay et al., 2014). The practice of inclusion provides a sense of belonging for students with disabilities by integrating them in a general education classroom with their peers (Parkay et al., 2014). Therefore, helping students with disabilities achieve this level. However, if the teacher does not feel confident in teaching an inclusion class, the students with disabilities may not experience a sense of belonging.

Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory stated that when students are placed in different types of cultures, they learn from engaging with others. Vygotsky stated that one type of culture is school (Miller, 2011). The practice of inclusion allows students with disabilities to engage with their non-disabled peers, once again promoting the integration of students with disabilities with students that do not have disabilities. Students with and without disabilities must be willing to accept and engage with each other to learn from one another. When students are willing to accept others despite differences, they engage in social opportunities and learn from others (Shogren et al., 2015).

Although the purpose of inclusion is to engage students with disabilities in the same culture as students without disabilities and promote social acceptance and exposure to the general education curriculum, general education teachers have expressed concerns about

preparation, training, and self-efficacy toward teaching students with disabilities (Avcioglu, 2016; Mackey, 2014; Urton et al., 2014). The role of a teacher is the most significant and critical role in the classroom (Avcioglu, 2016). If the teacher does not feel confident and positive toward teaching students with disabilities, the atmosphere for the inclusion classroom will not be represented as welcoming, nurturing, and accepting, therefore hindering the purpose of inclusion.

Although there has been a significant amount of research completed on the perception of teachers toward the practice of inclusion, there was a limited amount of research examining the experiences and perceptions of students with disabilities toward the practice of inclusion, specifically focusing on social acceptance and academic achievement (Rose & Shevlin, 2017). Students with disabilities have reported different experiences of acceptance due to factors such as the type of disability and classroom atmosphere established by the general education teacher (Cullinan, 2017; Shogren et al., 2015). Rose and Shevlin (2017) stated that more research needs to be completed to gather information from the experiences of students with disabilities toward inclusion. Researchers have already gathered much data on the perceptions of preservice and veteran teachers toward the practice of inclusion. However, there was little research on students' shared experience with disabilities in an inclusion classroom (Rose & Shevlin, 2017). By examining and describing the shared lived experiences of intermediate and middle school students with disabilities in an inclusion classroom, data were gathered on the social and academic perspectives of the students with disabilities, therefore, helping to close the gap in the literature.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

Inclusion is the practice of integrating students with disabilities in the general education classroom with their non-disabled peers. Students with disabilities are given access to the general education curriculum. In order to be academically successful, students with disabilities are provided with accommodations and support outlined in their Individualized Education Plan. In addition, students with disabilities have the opportunities to socially and academically engage with their non-disabled peers (Avcioğlu, 2016; Bossaert et al., 2015; Dieker & Hines, 2014; Mackey, 2014). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the lived experiences of inclusion for students with disabilities in grades fourth through eighth in Southwest Virginia.

Chapter Three of the study describes the procedures and methods used in this study of the perceptions of inclusion from the viewpoint of students with disabilities, focusing on social acceptance from peers and teachers and academic success. Furthermore, this chapter explains the research design, reiterates the research questions, describes the setting and the participants and design of the study. Also, Chapter Three describes the role of the researcher, the collection of data, and the analysis of data. Finally, the chapter concludes with a description of trustworthiness and ethical considerations for the study.

Design

The method used for this study is a qualitative method. Creswell and Poth (2018) describe the qualitative method as “addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 42). Furthermore, data were collected in the natural setting, and patterns and themes were examined (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, a qualitative design

centered on the perspectives and meanings of situations according to the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study examined students with disabilities' shared experiences of inclusion and their attitudes toward inclusion. Therefore, this study is suitable for a qualitative design because the researcher examines the perceptions of a group of individuals in a particular setting. (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The type of design that was used for the study was a phenomenological design. Phenomenology relies heavily on the writings of Edmund Husserl and is popular in areas such as social and health sciences, along with sociology (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) described phenomenology as a study of the appearance of things. It is rooted in questions that give direction and focus on meaning, and themes arise from the information gathered (Moustakas, 1994). Also, a phenomenology brings forth more inquiries and interest to the experience (Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenology is described by Moustakas (1994) as the focus on the appearance of things and the concern with the wholeness of an experience. A phenomenology explores the experience from all sides, angles, and perspectives to gather information to present a unified vision of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). After the experience is viewed from all sides, meaning is then constructed from the experience, and the experiences are described in detail (Moustakas, 1994).

A phenomenological approach is appropriate for the study because it is used to describe and understand the experience of a group of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). In addition, the group of individuals experienced the same situation or phenomenon; they have something in common with the other individuals. A phenomenon demonstrates the interconnectedness between people, objects, or things, of daily living in the world (Moustakas, 1994). The students involved in the study are students with disabilities. The phenomenon they

were sharing was the practice of inclusion. The experience of inclusion provided information on how students with disabilities interact with other individuals, the curriculum, and the setting of students with disabilities and students without disabilities. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that the group could vary in size, the group could be as low as three to four members, or it could contain from ten to fifteen members. A phenomenological study allowed for the shared experiences of students with disabilities participating in an inclusion setting, and it examined how they perceive social acceptance from their peers and their teachers. Furthermore, it examined the perception of students with disabilities toward the curriculum and academic success. The participants provided information on their shared experiences through interviews, observations, and a focus group. In a phenomenological study, these techniques are commonly used to gather data on the shared experience of the individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The use of these different methods provided accounts of the participants' experiences, and the research shared these experiences in full detail to give an accurate picture of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

The qualitative method also used the approach of transcendental phenomenology. Creswell and Poth (2018) described transcendental phenomenology as “identifying a phenomenon to study, bracketing out one’s experiences, and collecting data from several persons who have experienced the phenomenon” (p.78). Moustakas (1994) explained that with transcendental phenomenology, the researcher transcends from the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) described transcendental phenomenology using the Greek word, *Epoche*, which means the researcher separates his or her preconceived notions and prejudgments associated with the study and phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) described it as the researcher's job to allow the phenomenon to present itself and be just what it is without any added commentary or judgment

from the researcher. The researcher should be transparent and see the experience through a new vision (Moustakas, 1994).

Furthermore, Creswell and Poth (2018) described the role of the researcher as analyzing the data for common themes and reducing the information by looking for significant information and statements given by the participants. Moustakas (1994) described the use of Imaginative Variation, which referred to seeking out possible meanings and deriving a structural description of the essence of the experiences. For this study, the perceptions of students with disabilities in an inclusion classroom consisted of students in grades fourth through eighth sharing their experiences in an inclusion classroom and describing their attitudes towards shared experiences in social acceptance and academics. This approach was appropriate for the study because it focused on the phenomenon of inclusion among students with disabilities in grades fourth through eighth. All the students participating have experienced inclusion in the general education school setting. The information was gathered from students who participate in inclusion classes and examined for themes and the essence of the experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). With a transcendental phenomenology, I realized that it was necessary to bracket my own experiences as a general education teacher and special education teacher and my own feelings toward inclusion in the areas of acceptance and academics (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Any positive or negative experiences that I have had with teachers in inclusion classrooms were separated so that it did not alter interpretations of findings from the research (Moustakas, 1994). As Moustakas (1994) describes, I viewed the information from the participants with new eyes.

Research Question

Central Research Question: What are the shared lived experiences of students with disabilities in an inclusion classroom in the grades fourth through eighth?

Sub-Question One: What are the shared lived experiences of fourth grade through eighth-grade students with disabilities regarding the feelings of acceptance in the inclusion classroom?

Sub-Question Two: What are the shared lived experiences of students with disabilities regarding academic learning in an inclusion classroom?

Setting

The research took place in a rural setting. The school district was located in Southwest Virginia in a small town. Furthermore, the specific school setting included an intermediate school consisting of grades third through fifth, and a middle school, consisting of grades sixth through eighth. The intermediate school had a current population of 340 students in grades three through five. Out of the total population of 340 students, 46 students had an IEP (VDOE, 2019). The middle school had a current population of 393 students in grades six through eight. Out of the total population of 393 students, 81 students had an IEP (VDOE, 2019). The intermediate school had one administrator, an assistant principal, and a counselor. The assistant principal traveled between the intermediate and primary schools. There were four special education teachers in the intermediate school. For students that qualified, speech services, occupational therapy, physical therapy, vision services were offered. The majority of students with disabilities received instruction in the general education classroom. Few students received services in the self-contained classroom, and they participated in classes such as music, gym, and art. The middle school had one administrator, an assistant principal, and a counselor. There were five special education teachers. Services, such as speech, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and

vision, were offered to students that qualify. The majority of the students receive instruction in the general education classroom. Nine students receive services in a self-contained classroom setting and participate in resource classes. The sites were selected due to the high number of students with disabilities in an inclusion setting. Several of the classrooms had seven or more students that had a disability. The intermediate and middle schools provided inclusion services, and the students were in a general education setting, receiving accommodations and support. The intermediate school and middle school were chosen due to their consistency with the practice of inclusion. Students with disabilities received instruction in the general education classroom alongside their non-disabled peers. A general education teacher and a special education teacher were in the reading and math classes to provide instruction and services for students with disabilities. The disabilities of the students participating in an inclusion setting included specific learning disability, autism, visually impaired, or attention hyperactive deficit disorder. In addition, some students were intellectually disabled and participated in the general education classroom with a special education teacher or developmental aide. Therefore, the research provided perceptions and perspectives of students with different disabilities and did not focus on one particular type of disability.

By focusing on the intermediate school and middle school-aged participants, the setting was consistent for inclusion. In the district, there were four elementary schools. Two of the elementary schools in the district were grades three through five and were considered intermediate schools. The other two elementary schools consisted of grades pre-k through fifth grade. In each elementary school, special education teachers co-taught with general education teachers in several core subjects. The district had three middle schools located throughout the county. Each middle school consisted of grades sixth through eighth grade. Special education

teachers co-taught with general education teachers in middle schools, primarily in math and reading. Although, in some middle schools, special education teachers co-taught in other subjects as well. Furthermore, in subjects other than reading or math, support was offered through developmental aides. (Virginia Department of Education, 2019). In the elementary schools in the district, including the intermediate schools, math and reading were 60 minutes in length. The three middle schools in the district provided 90 minutes in both reading and math. Throughout the district, the expectations for providing an inclusive setting and the least restrictive environment were similar; therefore, this helped with data collection and examining the data for themes from a shared experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

Participants

For this study, purposeful sampling was used. Creswell and Poth (2018) described purposeful sampling as intentionally selecting a group sample that can best provide the researcher with information about the research problem. In this study, the participant pool consisted of intermediate school students with disabilities in the fourth and fifth grade and middle school students with disabilities in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades that participated in an inclusion classroom to receive services and accommodations for their disability. The disabilities of the students in the study included specific learning disability, other health impairment, and. The ages of the participants ranged from 9 to 14. In addition, there were 81 students with disabilities enrolled in middle school.

In the intermediate school, 18 students in the fourth grade received services, and 14 students in the fifth grade received services. The majority of students with disabilities were being served in an inclusion classroom. The ethnicity of the students consisted of Caucasian, African American, and multi-racial students (Virginia Department of Education, 2019).

The sample size consisted of 12 to 15 students from different grades. Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend the range of 5 to 25 participants; the sample size fell within the recommended range. Therefore, the minimum number of participants will be 12 students, and the maximum number of participants will be 15. If thematic saturation occurs before 12 participants, then I will seek no further information from new participants. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling with a letter sent home to all students with disabilities in inclusion classes at the school. The parents were asked to return the letter for participation. The students were asked to provide assent. Once letters were returned during the given time, participants were purposefully selected to give as much equal representation to race, gender, and grade. Using purposeful sampling gave equal representation to each grade level (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In order to participate in the study, the students met the criterion (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The criterion for the study included that the student had a disability and participated in an inclusion setting, not a self-contained special education classroom. This criterion consisted of students with and without disabilities receiving instruction in a general education classroom virtually or in a brick and mortar school with a general education teacher or a special education teacher providing the instruction by using this criterion and purposeful sampling. In addition, information was collected on the shared experience of students with disabilities in grades fourth through eighth and their attitude toward inclusion in reference to social acceptance and academic success.

The participants were students in grades fourth through eighth; therefore, both parent consent (See Appendix B) and student assent (See Appendix C) were required to participate in the study. A letter was sent to the parents explaining the study and permission for the student to participate in the study. The letter explained the data collection and the methods to be used in

the study, including one-on-one interviews, observations during the inclusion classes, and a focus group of at least five students sharing information on their experiences in an inclusion classroom. These data collection methods occurred via virtual means or in person at the individual locations of the school. Furthermore, it was explained that the student could withdraw from the research at any time (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, students were provided with a letter of assent explaining that participation is strictly voluntary, the requirements for participation, and describing the research conditions while providing them with the opportunity to withdraw from the study (Moustakas, 1994). In addition, an explanation was provided to the parent that the student's name would not be used, but instead, a pseudonym would be used to protect the student's confidentiality during the research. Furthermore, there were no identifying characteristics that will be included in the description.

Procedures

Procedures for the study were completed in the following order. First, a letter or email was sent to the superintendent of the school district describing the purpose of the study and the intentions (See Appendix A). An application for approval was sent to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Liberty University. Once the approval was sent, it was listed in the Appendix. After the superintendent gave consent to conduct the study within the middle school and obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board of Liberty University, the administrators were contacted. The students that met the criterion were sent a letter for assent to participate in the study, the parents were sent a letter for consent for their child to participate in the study (See Appendices B and C). The parents were responsible for returning both letters.

Once permission was granted, all participants were interviewed in a one-on-one interview to collect data. The interview was conducted at the school or virtually and was

recorded using two different devices. The interviews were conducted before classes began or at an appropriate time for the students. A schedule for the interviews was made. Before each interview, a phone call was made to remind the parent and the child that the interview would occur the next day. The interview took place in the school to provide the student with a comfortable atmosphere for the interview. In addition, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, participants were given the option to complete the interview virtually. Options for conducting the meeting included before school, after school, or at another time, so the student does not feel as if he or she is pulled away from certain classes. The interview was recorded with two devices, one being an iPad with the application for recording, and the other device was either a recorder or a laptop with the availability to record. The interviews took approximately 20 minutes.

Classroom observations were conducted in the participants' classrooms that met the criterion to gather data on social interaction and academics (See Appendix E). The observations consisted of observing fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, or eighth-grade students in either inclusion reading or math classes either in person or via having the sessions recorded for later viewing due to the pandemic. Before observing, the teachers were notified that the observations would take place. The observations took place once the individual interviews had been conducted. Therefore, the researcher knew which students to observe and was familiar with the student. The observations were at different times or different days to accommodate the different grades. The observations took place in the classroom to observe how students respond socially to their non-disabled peers while working on the content material. Field notes on social interactions and academic participation were collected during the observations. The template for the field notes is in Appendix E. Information included whether the students with disabilities engage with their non-disabled peers and the teacher. In addition, the information included how accommodations

were provided. For example, does the general education or special education teacher walk around and help all students? Are the students receiving services all located in one area to receive support? How are their needs addressed so that the student is not separated from his or her non-disabled peers?

Furthermore, data from a focus group was gathered. The focus group took place at the school or virtually if the pandemic merits such action, and two recording devices were used to help capture student responses. One of these devices captured a video recording to help identify the speakers during the focus group, and the researcher operated the video recording device. The video recording device was an iPad or other type of device that could record. All the participants were invited to the focus group. However, not all participants were expected to participate in the focus group. The focus group interview took place with the participants in the same room, either physically or virtually, and the participants were provided with prompts to discuss (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The template for the focus group is in Appendix F; however, as information was gathered from the interview, additional discussion prompts were added. The focus group was divided into grades to prevent students from feeling overwhelmed or intimidated by other participants from other grades. For example, if three fourth-graders volunteer for the research, the focus group will consist of those three fourth-graders sharing information. The same will be done for the other grades to help the students feel comfortable in the focus group. Since the study is a transcendental phenomenological qualitative design, the shared experiences were examined for common themes, and my feelings and thoughts toward inclusion were bracketed from experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The Researcher's Role

Currently, I am a special education teacher at an Intermediate school serving grades third through fifth. I am a 48 year -old, Caucasian female and I co-teach reading and math in all grades. Before becoming a special education teacher, I was a fourth-grade general education teacher for eleven years and a fifth-grade general education teacher for five years. For most of my years as a general education teacher, I taught an inclusion classroom. I decided to change over to a special education teacher three years ago. I was employed at a middle school where I co-taught math in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. At this time, I realized the impact of inclusion on factors such as a student's social acceptance among the teacher and peers and on the student's academics.

I have always believed in the power of a teacher to make a difference in a child's life. When I was a child, I experienced difficult times with my parents' divorce emotionally, and I also experienced financial hardships as a child. However, several of my teachers noticed and made sure that I felt safe, secure, and loved within the classroom.

Although public education does not allow for the direct teaching of the bible, I model my Christian beliefs daily within the classroom. I follow a Christian worldview and model my beliefs in Christianity, such as compassion, love for one another, and respect for the students and my colleagues. When I became a special education teacher, I started observing the perception of inclusion of general education teachers and the students. I believe the perception of inclusion begins with the teacher. If the teacher has a positive attitude towards inclusion and that every child can learn, this will be reflected in the classroom. Once I started co-teaching, I began to observe how students perceived inclusion. Some students felt as if the general education teacher singled them out, and they were embarrassed that they received accommodations such as a read-

aloud, while other students were grateful for the help due to struggling with reading such things as word problems in math. Inclusion is an essential tool in the success of children with disabilities. The use of inclusion can help a student feel socially accepted and provide the grade-appropriate curriculum with support for the students to be successful. However, after observing students and general education teachers in this setting, I have started to question whether inclusion provides opportunities for social acceptance and gains in academic areas.

In this study, my role was that of the human research instrument. I collected data through examining information from the interviews, observing behaviors in the classroom, and gathering information from the focus group (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used open-ended questions that I had developed myself (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These questions focused on the students' perceptions of the reading or math class and how they learn. In addition, the questions addressed the students with disabilities' perceptions of social acceptance from their teachers and peers (See Appendix D). I was aware of my own strong feelings and bias towards inclusion due to my own experience as a general education and special education teacher and due to my observations of other teachers and students. As a general education teacher, I thought sending students out of the room was vital because they received a read-aloud. I would pull them in a small group to a table within the room. When the special education teacher would come in for the co-teaching period, we would work with different groups. The groups would consist of students with disabilities and students without disabilities. When I switched to the role of a special education teacher, I would co-teach or be in classrooms where the practice of one teach while one assist would take place. As the general education teacher taught the lesson, I would monitor student progress by circulating the classroom and assisting the students that were having difficulty. Some general education teachers would send the students with disabilities out of the room to receive help. The

general education teacher would refer to the children as Mrs. Brown's group or the students that need a read-aloud need to leave with Mrs. Brown. I watched the expressions, and I observed several different feelings, such as embarrassment or indifference. Although I would speak with the teachers, they would continue to classify the students by their accommodations. I thought this was an injustice to the children, and the teachers' actions went against the idea of inclusion. Because this study utilizes a transcendental phenomenological method, I must acknowledge my experiences and feelings on the subject of inclusion and actively seek to bracket those out of my lens as I examine the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Due to my positive and negative experiences, I remained cognizant of my bias and how my thoughts and feelings related to this research.

I viewed the data collected about the experiences of inclusion without the influence of my experiences. As stated earlier, I believe that inclusive settings can be a powerful tool in social acceptance and with academic gains. However, the teacher and the students must be willing in this setting to make it successful. By examining the perceptions of students with disabilities in an inclusion setting and their perceptions of social acceptance and academics provided with the curriculum, data, and information from the students were gathered, and common themes were identified to help with the practice of inclusion and help to make this practice more successful for the students.

Data Collection

In this study, data were collected through interviews, observations, and a focus group. The first data collection tool that was used was interviews. The interviews were conducted with 13 students. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that a range of 5 to 25 participants is recommended. The participants were students that had met the criterion of having a disability and receiving

instruction in an inclusion classroom. After the interviews were conducted, the observations of the students were completed. During instruction, the observations were conducted in the classroom to observe natural behaviors such as social interaction taking place while the teacher was providing instruction; these observations were noted within the classroom. However, due to the pandemic of COVID-19, the observations may be completed virtually. After the observations were completed, a focus group was formed with half of the participants. The students shared comments and information about participating in an inclusion classroom and how they perceived social acceptance in the classroom. The information was collected by meeting with students in person or virtually due to the pandemic. Collecting data in this sequence helps the researcher fully understand the shared experience, and therefore, common themes can be identified to help create a successful inclusion experience. All interview and focus group questions were piloted with two high school students with disabilities that are not eligible for the current study.

Individual Interviews

Creswell and Poth (2018) described the interview process to gather information from the participant to understand the experience from that individual's point of view. Moustakas (1994) explained that before an interview takes place, the researcher must engage in the Epoche process and set aside any biases. Furthermore, Moustakas (1994) explained that engaging in the Epoche process may also be necessary during the interview. The interviews were conducted in person with the participants in an empty classroom or conference room at the intermediate or middle school or virtually, by Google Meet. Moustakas (1994) mentioned different interviewing formats, including informal interviews with the participants or the use of open-ended questions. The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions. Using open-ended questions allowed the participants to answer freely and not be limited in answering questions (Creswell &

Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Discussions occurred during the questioning. Moustakas (1994) explained that discussions could lead to new areas of questioning for the study, including questions to clarify information.

The interviews were conducted within the school setting. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that the interview should take place in a physical setting without distractions so that the taping of the interview can take place. Moustakas (1994) stated that it is the researcher's responsibility to create a comfortable climate for the participants, therefore, encouraging an atmosphere where the participants will respond honestly and provide their perceptions and attitudes. A time was planned that was convenient for the student. Recording devices were used to record the interview. During the interview, the interviewer took notes and made memos about the interview. At least two different recording devices were used during the interviews. Once the interviews were completed, the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The interviews lasted from 20 to 40 minutes per participant.

The following were the open-ended interview questions (See Appendix D).

1. Describe your reading and math class, including the teachers, and how you learn in these classrooms.
2. Describe your experience with academics in your math and reading classes.
3. Which teacher or teachers do you feel care about you the most? What does she/he do that makes you feel this way?
4. Describe your experience of interacting with the students in your math and reading classes.
5. Describe how the accommodations you receive are provided to you during the instruction of math and reading.
6. How do you think your math and reading teacher treats you?

7. How do you think your math and reading teacher treats your classmates?
8. How do you think the other students in the class treat you?
9. What things do your peers do to make you feel accepted or different?
10. In what ways do you interact with your peers outside of the school setting?
11. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about how you feel about your math and reading class and how you fit in with your peers?

Questions one and two were designed to describe the student's perception of the inclusion classroom and the student's perception of academic success.

These perceptions are correlated to the success of an inclusion classroom providing the student with positive interaction socially and opportunities to access the general education curriculum successfully, therefore giving the student a sense of belonging (Colum & McIntyre, 2019). Data retrieved from questions one and two will answer CQ and SQ2.

Questions three, four, and five examined how the student perceived inclusion and how the student perceived he or she was being treated by others in the classroom (Bossaert, 2015; Cullinan, 2017). Acceptance of students with disabilities by their non-disabled peers is essential for inclusion (Bossaert, 2015; Cullinan, 2017). Furthermore, question five addressed how the accommodations are provided. These questions addressed teachers' methods such as seating arrangement, presenting material either in the classroom or provided by pulling students out of the classroom, and whether the student felt that the teacher genuinely cared about him or her. The influence of the teacher and the students without disabilities, whether positive or negative, impacted the student's perception (Monsen et al., 2014). Information collected from these questions answered CQ, SQ1, and SQ2.

Furthermore, questions six and seven examined the relationships between the teacher and the non-disabled peers and the relationships of the teacher and the students with disabilities. These questions were geared to investigate if the participant observed the teacher treating the students differently or if the participant did not observe any differences. These questions provided information from the student's perspective on relationships in an inclusion classroom (Rose & Shevlin, 2017). Data collected from questions six and seven answered CQ and SQ1.

Questions eight and nine were directed at peer relationships in the classroom and the feelings of acceptance among peers without disabilities. These questions examined the participants' relationships with other students in the classroom, including students without disabilities. Positive relationships with peers without disabilities create feelings of acceptance and belonging (Colum & McIntyre, 2019). The last question allowed the participant to add any information he or she thinks is beneficial for the interview and study—questions eight and nine provided data to answer CQ and SQ1.

Observations

Creswell and Poth (2018) described observation as a key tool for gathering data in qualitative research. In addition, Creswell and Poth (2018) described observation as the “act of noting a phenomenon in the field setting through the five senses of the observer” (p.166). The basis for the observation was the research questions. The researcher used the questions as a guide for the observation, looking for specific information correlated to the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The observations for the research were conducted in the classrooms. The classrooms selected were the inclusion classrooms of reading and math. Since the research involved students in an inclusion setting, several students may or may not be in the inclusion room being observed (See Appendix E). During the observation, field notes were recorded on

social interaction between the teacher and the participants and the participants and the peers. In addition, notes were taken on the participant's interpretation of the material presented in class and the willingness and completion of the tasks assigned in class. As the material was being taught in class, the researcher observed the student raising his or her hand and answered the questions. In addition, the researcher noted if the student was able to answer questions, follow along with the instruction, such as taking notes or solving problems with the teacher. Although the researcher was not participating in the observation, she walked around as the teacher was presenting the material to observe if the student is on task with note-taking or solving problems. Each observation lasted the duration of the class period. The class period was usually 45 minutes, but it varied due to some classes being 90 minutes long in this particular middle school. During the observation, Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that the observer should record as much as possible, beginning the observation broadly and then narrowing it down to the research questions. The template is provided in Appendix E.

Focus Groups

Creswell and Poth (2018) described the use of a focus group as being likely to yield the best information because of the interaction among the interviewees. Although some of the questions were similar between the individual interview questions and the focus group questions, the focus group questions were centered more on how the students work with others in the class and styles of learning. The center of interest for the interview questions was the interpretation of the treatment from the teacher and from the peers that are non-disabled. Although all participants were allowed to participate in the focus group, the focus group consisted of at least five participants (See Appendix F). Procedures for the focus group were similar to the procedures followed for the individual interviews (Yin, 2014). The focus group interview was

recorded using two devices to ensure the recording. The interviews occurred in person or virtually to accommodate the participants due to the pandemic. During the interview, notes were taken as the questions were asked, and the information was being recorded. Furthermore, after the interview, the information was transcribed verbatim for accuracy. Using focus groups encouraged participation from the participants because they were allowed to interact with one another on the same topics and discuss shared experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The following are focus group interview questions (See Appendix F).

1. Please introduce yourself, giving your name and grade.
2. What ways do you enjoy learning in the classroom?
3. What are some examples of how you work with others in the classroom, including group or peer work? Please explain.
4. How do you receive instruction in the class? Do you ever leave the class for instruction?
5. Describe ways in which you interact with your teacher in the class, what are your experiences with the teacher in class?
6. Describe ways you interact with your peers in the class. What are your experiences with the peers in the class?

Questions 2 through 6 provided data regarding the CQ. These questions provided information about the shared lived experiences of the students with disabilities in an inclusion classroom. Question 3 provided information for SQ1 by giving data about how students perceive acceptance among peers. Questions 2 and 4 provided information for SQ2. The participants provided information about their perception of academic learning in an inclusion classroom. Furthermore, questions 5 and 6 will provide data regarding SQ1. The participants shared their experiences of how they are perceived by others and feelings of acceptance.

Data Analysis

Creswell and Poth (2018) described data analysis as a spiral, starting with the data collection and progressing to displaying and reporting the data. Furthermore, Moustakas (1994) described data analysis as examining the data and determining the essential or significant statements, looking for broad themes or horizons, organizing the ideas into broader ideas, integrating the significance of themes, explaining the structure of the themes, and developing a description of the shared experience known as the phenomenon. Thus, the data analysis started with organizing the data, memoing important ideas, classifying the information into codes, then into themes, assessing the information, and displaying the data. Once the individual interviews and focus group interviews were transcribed, the process of member checking was used to ensure the participants were represented accurately (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, although software is available to assist with coding, the researcher coded and searched for themes in the data.

The information gathered from the research was first organized for future use of the information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once the information was organized, then the researcher began reading through the information and memoing the developing ideas. Moustakas (1994) describes this process as “the primary researcher places the transcribed interviews before him or her and studies the materials through the methods and procedures of phenomenological analysis” (p.118). The researcher summarized the field notes taken during the observation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once the notes were written from the information, the researcher began to summarize the information and the reflections collected over a period of time (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moustakas (1994) stated that during this process, phenomenological reduction should be used. Phenomenological reduction allowed the researcher to describe in textural structure, which referred to viewing the experiences as they appear, without any preconceptions

about the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) described this process as “seeing things as they appear, in returning things to themselves” (p. 90). Also, Moustakas (1994) explained the process of describing in textural structure as using textural qualities such as small or big, smooth or rough, angry or calm, words describing the experience that occurs and adding different angles of the perception.

The information collected from the individual interviews, observations, and focus groups were examined for the themes that emerged. The data were examined for reoccurring themes, which Moustakas (1994) described as the practice of horizontalizing. Moustakas (1994) described horizontalizing the information collected as looking at every piece of information and statement as having equal value. Then the researcher listed the units of meaning and clustered them into common categories, also referred to as themes (Moustakas, 1994). Creswell and Poth (2018) also referred to determining themes from classifying and interpreting the data by coding. Creswell and Poth (2018) described coding as separating the data into small categories of information and deciding what information leads to common themes and what information is not needed. Using thick, rich descriptions provided by the interviews, observations, and focus groups, the researcher investigated themes that occurred and refined the themes.

Once the themes were clustered, they were used to construct the textural descriptions of the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Afterward, the textural and structural descriptions were integrated into deriving the meaning and essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The structural descriptions of the experience described the underlying factors that justify what is being experienced (Moustakas, 1994). The structural descriptions helped to describe how the “experience of the phenomenon come to be what it is” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98). The researcher looked for meaningful themes that represented more significant

ideas of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) referred to this as the process of Imaginative Variation. Moustakas (1994) described this task as “to seek possible meanings through the utilization of imagination, varying the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals,” (p. 97). Moustakas (1994) also described the process of Imaginative Variation as viewing the experience from different positions or roles so that the researcher arrived at structural descriptions or the underlying factors of the experience. Moustakas (1994) stated that with the organization and analysis of the data, the textural and structural descriptions are integrated, and then meanings and essences of the phenomenon are established. During this study, the researcher examined the data for structural themes related to social belonging and acceptance and academic success from an inclusion setting based on the purpose of inclusion. Therefore, answering questions refers to social acceptance and belonging and academic success in an inclusion classroom.

Trustworthiness

Creswell and Poth (2018) described different strategies in qualitative research to achieve validity. Among the strategies, Creswell and Poth (2018) described the use of triangulation of several data sources. The use of individual interviews, observations, and focus groups will provide different data that can be used to achieve triangulation. In addition, there is the use of member checking in which taking the written descriptions and interpretations back to the participant and checking for accuracy and credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using these various methods will contribute to achieving trustworthiness in the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, in order to achieve trustworthiness of the study, credibility, dependability, and confirmability, and transferability need to be achieved.

Credibility

Credibility was achieved by using the strategy for validation through the participant's lens. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that participants have a significant role in helping with validation of the study, and it can be achieved through the use of member checking. The researcher took the written data, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants to ensure accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants had the opportunity to review the information for accuracy and credibility. The use of member checking gave a significant role to the participant in checking for accurate information and, therefore, added to the research's credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Member checking was used in this study to ensure credibility of the data and information recorded for the study. All interview transcripts and focus group transcripts were shared with the participants to verify that the information reported was the same as what they said and meant.

Dependability and Confirmability

The strategy of member checking was also used for dependability and conformability. The participants were asked to examine rough drafts of the researcher's work and examine the language used for accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The rough draft reflected the information given by the participant accurately and confirmed that the participant was being represented correctly (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, the participant checked for agreement of themes that have been connected to the information provided by the participant. In addition to member checking for dependability and conformability, peer review was used. Creswell and Poth (2018) described peer review as "an individual who keeps the researcher honest; asks hard questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations; and provides the researcher with the opportunity for catharsis by sympathetically listening to the researcher's feelings" (p. 263). The

peer was a peer who had a terminal degree and who was familiar with the topic and research. Also, this peer provided truthful information that helped the research provide valid information.

Transferability

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), transferability is described as how the information collected from the research can be applied to other studies that are similar in other settings. The researcher must provide rich, thick descriptions of the information to the reader to achieve transferability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, to achieve transferability, the researcher will provide a detailed description of the participants and the setting being studied to provide an accurate image of the information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, personal bias and personal experiences will be separated from the research preventing interference with the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For example, I had strong feelings towards the success of inclusion being dependent upon social acceptance and academic achievement of students with disabilities. If these students are being categorized due to their disabilities, such as students that receive a read-aloud, this will hinder social acceptance and academic achievement because they will not feel integrated among their peers. When conducting the research, I bracketed these feelings and did not transfer them into the research. All findings were reported with thick, rich descriptions that retained the characteristics of the participants to provide an authentic representation of the experience.

Ethical Considerations

Data collection did not begin until the Institutional Review Board of Liberty had approved. Consents from the participants' parents and assents from the participants were collected before participating in the research. In addition, the parents and the participants were given a detailed description of the research, and the information reiterated that participation was

voluntary, and the participant could choose to leave the study. The participants' names were not used, but instead, pseudonyms were used in place of the names. The research material was kept in a secure place that was locked. If information was collected digitally, then a passcode was required before accessing the digital information. Strategies such as member checking and peer review were used to ensure validity and reliability during the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, bracketing was used to segregate my bias and experiences from the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moustakas (1994) explained that the purpose of a phenomenology is to remove anything that could represent a preconceived idea or feeling towards an experience. In addition, Moustakas (1994) stated that a phenomenology requires the researcher to look at the findings openly and without bias or prejudice.

Summary

Chapter Three included the description of the qualitative research design, a transcendental phenomenological approach that examined the shared experiences of the perceptions of students with disabilities towards inclusion. The focus was on the perceptions of social acceptance and academic success for students in an inclusion classroom. The research questions correlated to the study were listed in Chapter Three. The location of the research was addressed. The research was conducted in both an intermediate and middle school in Southwest Virginia. The participants were students with disabilities in the fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, or eighth grades receiving instruction in an inclusion class. The demographics of schools were given, including numbers of total students, numbers of students with disabilities, and numbers of females and males with disabilities. In addition, the ethnicity of the students was described in Chapter Three. Furthermore, the procedures and the researcher's role in the study were described. The interview questions were listed in Chapter Three, along with the correlation to

research. Also, Chapter Three described the methods for data collection and data analysis. Finally, the issue of trustworthiness was addressed in Chapter Three, along with ethical considerations.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

Chapter Four presents descriptions of the participants for this study and how their shared lived experiences of inclusion for students with disabilities, regarding the practice of inclusion at both a rural intermediate and middle school in an inclusion classroom highlights overall themes from the research questions. Data were collected from thirteen participants who are students in an intermediate school or middle school in Southwest Virginia. The participants include five students in the fifth grade and eight students in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the lived experiences of inclusion for students with disabilities in fourth through eighth grade regarding the practice of inclusion at both a rural intermediate and middle school in Southwest Virginia. Chapter Four presents a description of the participants, discussion of the data results and themes.

Participants

Overall, thirteen students participated in the study. Invitations to participate were sent to all guardians and students in the fourth through eighth grade in one intermediate and one middle school in Southwest Virginia. Consent was obtained from the parents, and assent was obtained from the students before conducting the research. All participants had to be students with a disability. In addition, the participants must receive instruction in an inclusion classroom. The participants were interviewed to collect information on their perception of social acceptance with their peers and teachers. They were also interviewed to collect information on their perception of their academic success and their perceptions of how they are learning in the classroom. Instead of having one focus group, two focus groups were formed to accommodate intermediate and middle school students. In addition, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, gathering students from

two different schools together was restricted. All five elementary students participated in the focus group interview. On the middle school level, six out of the eight participants participated in the focus group interview. A brief description of the participants using pseudonyms is listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Participants' Demographics

Name	Age	Gender	Disability	Grade
Amy	10	Female	Specific Learning Disability	Fifth
Aaron	11	Male	Autism/Speech Language Impairment	Fifth
Alana	11	Female	Specific Learning Disability	Fifth
Brian	10	Male	Other Health Impairment	Fifth
Braylon	10	Male	Specific Learning Disability	Fifth
Brad	14	Male	Autism	Eighth
Chloe	13	Female	Specific Learning Disability	Sixth
Chris	15	Male	Specific Learning Disability	Eighth

Colin	12	Male	Other Health Impairment	Seventh
Dana	12	Female	Specific Learning Disability	Seventh
David	12	Male	Specific Learning Disability	Sixth
Dylan	11	Male	Specific Learning Disability	Sixth
Frank	13	Male	Other Health Impairment/Specific Learning Disability/Speech and Language Impairment	Sixth

The following information describes the individual participants in the study. The information includes the age of the participant, gender, disability, and age of the students. In addition, the information reflects the participant's perception of relationships with peers and teachers. The participant discussed how he or she perceives being accepted by the other students and teachers. Lastly, the information gathered from the participants discusses how each participant feels about how she or he is performing academically in the classes.

Amy

Amy was a 10-year-old girl in the fifth grade. She had a specific learning disability in math, and she participated in a general education classroom, which is also an inclusion classroom. She was eager to participate in the interview, and she was pleasant during the interview. When asked to describe her math and reading teachers and how she learned in the classrooms, she described her math teacher as “hyper and happy” (Amy, Interview, February 22, 2021). She said these characteristics motivated her to learn. She described her reading teacher as smart and fashionable. She said she liked her teacher because she understood her. She shared that her grades are mainly A’s and B’s, but she does get behind on occasion. She said the students used Google Classroom this year, and she said it gave her an opportunity to work at home if she needed to catch up on her work. She liked all of her teachers because they made sure she kept up with the work and “stayed focused” (Amy, Interview, February 22, 2021) because at times, she said, “it’s just a lot” (Amy, Interview, February 22, 2021). When asked how she thought the teachers treated her, she said, “Actually, they treat me as others, but at the same time keeping me focused” (Amy, Interview, February 22, 2021). When asked about her peers and socializing with the different students in class, she said she has friends, and she has sleepovers with some of the students in the classroom. She also did not think her peers treated her any differently and that when she asked others to be her friend, they would be her friend. She did say before COVID, she would go up and hug her friends, but now that is different.

Amy was observed during a math class. She sat at the front of the classroom. On occasion, she had to be redirected to stay on task. Once she was redirected, she would participate. The students were reviewing previous skills to help prepare for the upcoming Standards of Learning test. Amy enjoyed answering questions correctly, and she would smile

when complemented by the teacher. When given the opportunity, she would turn and talk to a student behind her. When the students were asked to answer the questions independently, Amy had difficulty staying on task with her peers. The math teacher would remind her to keep working. Once she was reminded, she would begin working again.

Aaron

Aaron was in the fifth grade. He was an eleven-year student with autism. He participated in the interview by Google Meet. Aaron was pleasant with good manners. He was happy to participate and provide information. When asked about his reading and math teachers and how he learns in the classrooms, he explained that the assignments were given to the students, and they completed them on Google Classroom. He said there was usually a list on the board. He felt like he was pretty successful, and if he was going to get a bad grade, such as an “F,” the teachers would warn him, and he then had the opportunity to do the assignment again. He commented that with the assignments, he could “mostly handle it by myself” (Aaron, Interview, February 23, 2021); however, once in a while, he has to ask questions. He also stated that he felt like all of his teachers cared about him because they worked very hard and tried to make the material accessible. When asked about accommodations, he asked me to explain what I meant by accommodations. After explaining the word accommodations, he stated he liked to take walks or have breaks to help him when he must take a test. Overall, he commented that his teachers treated him well and helped him feel accepted. When asked about friends, Aaron explained that he talked to others a little but not too much because he liked to do other things that are different from other students. He said, “And sometimes I feel like I have no friends and sometimes I don’t and feel loneliness,” (Aaron, Interview, February 23, 2021). I asked him to elaborate, and he said that at times, he would try to greet others or ask if they could talk about particular subjects, and

he said, “They sometimes just ignore me sometimes,” (Aaron, Interview, February 23, 2021). He also commented that he does not see his classmates outside of school, and he does not play any games or video games with his peers.

Aaron was observed during a reading lesson. He sat at the front of the classroom and participated early during the lesson reviewing figurative language. Aaron raised his hand to participate in all questions asked. He exhibited confidence with his answers. Often, he was asked to answer the questions when no other student would volunteer. One student who sat diagonally from him commented, “good job” to him when he correctly answered the questions. Aaron stayed on task during instruction and seemed to enjoy the review. At the end of the lesson, the students played Kahoot. Aaron was very competitive, and he would express displeasure when he was not quick enough to be the first to answer. During the lesson, Aaron would turn and try to engage with the other students. The students would kindly respond and comment back to him.

Alana

Alana was an eleven-year-old fifth-grade student at the intermediate school. She had a specific learning disability in reading. During the interview, Alana was confident with her answers, and she enjoyed sharing information. When she described her reading and math class, she described the use of small group settings to help her learn. She said, “I know those teachers that put me in those small groups, understand what’s going on, and I know they have a way to help me,” (Alana, Interview, February 24, 2021). Alana described a time where she struggled with reading and how once “those” teachers, meaning special education teachers, started helping her, everything changed for her. She said, “It’s just changed, everything changed over the years from what I had compared to when I was younger compared to now, it’s crazy...” (Alana, Interview, February 24, 2021).

Alana also stated that now she mainly makes A's in her classes. Alana described her teachers as supportive. When describing her teachers, she included all her general education teachers and her special education teacher. The fifth-grade class was departmentalized; she had a different teacher for each subject. She said the special education teacher always listened, and all the teachers were there for her when she needed them. In addition, she described the dynamics of the math and reading class. She discussed how students were separated into groups. She also said the students in the group worked well together. She said, "I know we're gonna help each other, no matter what it is. We're basically like a family, and we know we're gonna be very great working with each other for long as ever," (Alana, February 24, 2021).

Furthermore, she discussed receiving the accommodation of a read-aloud which she explained as being beneficial for her. Alana was descriptive when talking about her problem with reading. She understood that she took a little longer than others. She said working in a small group "helped a lot," (Alana, Interview, February 24, 2021). She also said, "It's just really helpful, and I'm really lucky I get to have all this and everything," (Alana, Interview, February 24, 2021). When asked how she thought her peers treated her, she stated, "Like I'm normal, like there's nothing wrong. Like I'm just one of them," (Alana, Interview, February 24, 2021). She said she has friends who were a part of her small group setting and that she also has friends outside of the small group settings. She said she was aware that she has friends who do not need help in a small group setting. Outside of school, she said she has friends she texts or uses Kid's Messenger so they can video chat. When asked if there was anything else she would like to share about her experience with math, reading, her teachers, and peers, she stated that she feels great about school and with the teachers and students, "We're basically just one big family, there's nothing else to it," (Alana, Interview, February 24, 2021).

Alana was observed during a math lesson reviewing previous skills to prepare for the Standards of Learning test. She was happy during the lesson and would smile at the teacher. She enjoyed talking to her peers surrounding her after she finished her independent work. During the instruction, Alana volunteered to answer questions. She stayed on pace with her peers in the classroom. She appeared confident with her answers, and the math teacher complimented her work on her math problems when she finished.

Brian

Brian was a ten-year-old student in the fifth grade. He is a student with a disability under the category of other health impairment. This category includes students with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity that experience difficulty academically due to ADHD or ADD. The classes in fifth grade were departmentalized. Brian had a different teacher for math, reading, science, and language. During the interview, Brian was quiet and shy. It took a while for Brian to feel comfortable and participate. When asked to describe the reading and math classes, including the teachers, he described what he did in the classes. In math, he said he wrote things down, and sometimes it took him longer than his peers. He said he worked on his own in math and tried to figure the problems out by looking at them. With reading, he said he listened to the material and followed along. He said his teachers help him “a little bit and then let me finish the rest of it,” (Brian, Interview, March 1, 2021). He said math was easier than reading because he learned a lot by helping his dad at home with his jobs. When asked about reading, he said he struggled with staying on the same level as his peers. He said, “I don’t think I’m doing that well.” (Brian, Interview, March 1, 2021). He mentioned that when the material was read to him, he thought that helped him. He discussed that when he tried to read something, he was not able to focus. Therefore, getting a read-aloud helped him. He also said that the accommodation of breaking

down the material helped him with the problems. When asked about how his teachers treat him and which one cared about him the most, he responded with, “I think they all care about me the same,” (Brian, Interview, March 1, 2021). When compared to his classmates, he said the teachers treated him the same. Socially, he responded that he had many friends that sat around him in class. He said he felt accepted by his classmates, and he did not feel any different from them.

Brian was observed during a math lesson. He sat in the middle section of the classroom. Brian had mentioned in his interview that he enjoyed math. During the lesson, Brian listened to the teacher and worked out the problems with the teacher and independently. Although he stayed on task, he was reluctant to raise his hand and provide answers. When his peers began talking around him, he would turn and talk with them. The students were asked to answer questions for a quick mastery check independently. Brian began working once directions were given. He did raise his hand and ask the teacher if he was working the problem correctly. Once he received affirmation, he continued working.

Braylon

Braylon was a ten-year-old fifth-grade student in the intermediate school who had a Specific Learning Disability in reading and math. Braylon was very respectful during the interview. He had a quiet voice and, at times, was asked to speak up. He appeared shy but ready to answer questions. When asked to describe his reading and math class, he mentioned that the teachers read the material to help him. He thought he did well in math. He said the majority of the work was completed on computers. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Google Classroom has been implemented, and work was completed through that platform. He said he enjoyed working on the computer. When asked about his academic experience, he commented that it was hard for him to keep up, and that sometimes he could do the work, and other times he could not. He also

said he used a calculator in math to help him answer the problems. He said he tried his “hardest” (Braylon, Interview, March 4, 2021) with the computer and classes. He stated that “...basically all the teachers” (Braylon, Interview, March 4, 2021) cared about him the most. He also said they believed in him. When asked about his peers and feeling accepted, he said he was not sure if some of his peers accepted him or not, and he that he did have some friends. He mentioned that one girl was not nice to him in the class. In addition, when he referred to his peers in fifth grade, he stated, “They can be a little bit rough because I’m in the fifth grade,” (Braylon, Interview, March 4, 2021). Outside of school, he said he did not talk to any friends and mainly talked to his cousins or family.

An observation was conducted on Braylon during a math lesson. He sat at the front of the room and watched as the teacher completed examples of the math review on the board. He was quiet during the instruction and did not interact with his peers. When given problems to complete independently, Braylon used a calculator. The special education teacher helped Braylon with the word problems. Once the teacher read the problem, she would help Braylon break the problem into smaller parts. Braylon worked diligently with the word problems. If the problems were computation such as adding fractions, Braylon completed them independently, using his calculator.

Brad

Brad was an eighth-grade student in middle school. He was fourteen years old, and he was a student with autism. During the interview, Brad was direct and interested in the questions. He was eager to participate in the interview. Brad was asked to describe his reading and math class, including the teachers and how he learned. He was descriptive with his answers, and he said that reading was not “... too bad” (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021) and that they had been

mainly working on essays, editing for spelling mistakes and commas. He commented that the class received a "...visual representation of what we see," (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021). The visual representation referred to graphic organizers or copies of the notes for the writing assignment. The teacher provided the graphic organizers as handouts or the graphic organizers were presented on the board. He said the visual representations helped him with his writing. When asked about math, he said, "You see, I actually have a really good memory for my age and for in general, so it makes it a lot easier than normal," (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021).

Furthermore, he explained that he learned things automatically. He said he was usually at the back of the class, and because of COVID, there were not many students in some classes. He described his experience with academics in the classroom as "...pretty manageable, not too hard, not too easy," (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021). When asked about what accommodations were used to help him learn, he mentioned that he wore glasses, and for important tests, he left the classroom to test in a smaller group setting. However, he stated that he remained in class with the majority of the work because he could complete the work. Brad explained that he would leave the classroom to work in a smaller group setting for most of the important tests in the past years, but now, he does not leave the classroom often. However, he commented that he preferred being in the smaller group. He said his math and reading teacher treated him well, and they were "...always willing to help explain something to me, help me out with problems," (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021).

He referred to the special education teacher or other assistants as the extra people who work with the students. He said the special education teachers help the students during instruction. Brad stated that his teachers treat him and his peers the same. When asked about interacting and socializing with peers, he stated that the peers treat him well; however, he does

not socialize with others frequently. He said, “I’m not really the best when it comes to socializing,” (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021).

When asked to elaborate, Brad described his disability of autism. He described how autism affected “...you in all kinds of different ways,” (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021). He also said that it could not be assumed that people with autism are all the same. He described autism as a trade-off, and although he was less social, he felt it gave him more skills in other areas. He said an attribute of having autism was his ability to learn quickly and retain information by having a good memory. When asked if he felt accepted or different by his peers, he stated that he did feel accepted. Brad was asked if he interacted with peers outside of school, and he said that it was difficult due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some friends transferred to virtual learning, and he had not been able to communicate daily with them outside of school and, therefore, had not seen some of his friends.

Brad was observed during his math class which was working on scatterplots. The teacher was providing scaffolding on how to construct a scatterplot. Brad sat at the back of the classroom. Due to COVID-19, the class size was small, and several students were receiving instruction virtually. The special education teacher was assisting students as the math teacher presented the lesson. Brad began working immediately, and he stayed on task. However, he did not raise his hand to answer questions during the whole group instruction. The students were providing information on hours of sleep to construct the scatterplot. When it was Brad’s turn, he reported the number of hours he slept. During the instruction, Brad was serious and worked to answer the problems as the teacher provided examples on the board.

Chloe

Chloe was a thirteen-year-old girl in the sixth grade at the middle school. She has a specific learning disability in the area of reading. During the interview, Chloe was energetic and happy. She appeared excited to participate in the interview. Chloe described the atmosphere of her reading and math class along with the personality of the teachers. She explained that in reading, the teacher is energetic and not dull, which encouraged her to pay attention in class. She also commented on the demeanor of the reading teacher and said the teacher was very nice to her. Chloe elaborated by explaining that the teacher helped her with vocabulary, spelling, and with pronouncing words. She also said that the positive atmosphere created in the reading class helped her connect with her friends. She described math class as boring at times. However, she did say the math teacher was, in her words, great. Chloe explained that because of her math teacher and the strategies the teacher had presented in class, Chloe has improved with division and working with decimals. She also said, “And I’m pretty sure I’m the favorite ‘cause I answer all the questions,” (Chloe, Interview, March 5, 2021). Chloe explained that when she compares previous school years, this year she has felt successful, unlike earlier years. She also said she would like to have more teachers with the personalities and attributes that her math and reading teachers demonstrate. She explained that these particular teachers understand the diversity of learners and recognize and address the needs of different learners, such as students who have difficulty focusing while in class and students who need extra support. Also, Chloe explained that she has felt comfortable and has established a positive relationship with her teachers. She explained that she had shared events that had happened in her life with them. After sharing these intimate details, her teachers would ask her daily if she was doing well. Chloe stated that in the past, she has felt ignored by her teachers. While she discussed her reading teacher, she said,

“And she makes me feel that someone will actually listen to me...” (Chloe, Interview, March 5, 2021). Chloe was asked about any accommodations that she received to help her, and she said the assistant teacher would read to her if she needed the help. She also said that the teachers would read the information to the whole class to make sure everyone was listening and understood. She explained that there are two teachers, and they will take turns in the classroom. Chloe stated that she is treated “...like any other student,” (Chloe, Interview, March 5, 2021). She used the word equally when describing the treatment of her and her peers.

She was passionate when describing how her teachers have made her feel accepted. She explained that she has no reservation going to them with problems. Chloe was asked about her interaction with her peers. She was asked about her perception of feeling accepted or different. Chloe stated that in her reading class, many of the students make her feel comfortable and listen to her. She said if she needed something, she felt her peers would provide support for her. She said the peers in her class complimented her and engaged in conversation. Outside of school, she played video games with her peers or texted them, or would it be and texted with them. She stated that due to the pandemic, her parents are strict about friends coming over and staying.

Chloe was observed during a reading class. Before the reading began, the students were allowed to eat breakfast as the teacher took attendance. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the students ate breakfast in the classroom. Chloe was later coming into the classroom. A group of girls were discussing the new student, who was a boy. When Chloe entered, she said good morning to the teacher, and the girls began talking with her and directed her attention to their conversation. They began talking about the new boy. Chloe immediately engaged in conversation with them and giggled. Once instruction began, Chloe focused her attention on the teacher. She sat at the front of the classroom. Chloe was eager to answer questions. She raised

her hand consistently and was called on frequently to answer questions. She enjoyed participating during instruction. The students were reviewing vocabulary words. The special education teacher presented the instruction for the whole group while the general education teacher took attendance. Once she finished taking attendance, the teacher joined the lesson and interjected with additional information on the vocabulary lesson.

Chris

Chris was a fifteen-year-old boy in the eighth grade. Chris was a student with a specific learning disability in reading. During the interview, he exhibited an outgoing personality. His demeanor was kind and very friendly. When asked to describe his math and reading class, how he learned, and his teachers, he responded first with the subject of math. He said math was great, and he described the teacher as nice, very sweet, and funny. He said that she explained the material well and presented the material in a manner to ensure that it was easy to understand. When he described the atmosphere and structure of the math classroom, he stated that there was an assistant teacher in the class and that both teachers helped the students. He said they were both nice and helpful to all the students. He said the class was not very big because many students were online. Therefore, it was an easy task to provide help to everyone in the class. He also said that the teacher demonstrated examples on the board or with the interactive projector, and then she walked around to observe the students and provide help as needed. Chris also mentioned that the teacher "...explains things really well, like tips and stuff, like angles, saying the slope and something catchy, which actually makes me remember it" (Chris, Interview, March 5, 2021). He also stated he received the read-aloud accommodation and that when the material was being read by someone other than himself, the information made more sense. He said, "Sometimes it just sounds better at different times with somebody else," (Chris, Interview,

March 5, 2021). In addition, he said that his math teacher engaged with the students, discussing other events or subjects that did not relate to math. For example, the teacher asked the students about their day. Chris described how the math teacher joked with the students and how this characteristic made math more exciting and encouraged students to engage in the lesson. He described the environment of this class as enjoyable. However, when he described reading, his demeanor and tone of voice changed. He described his reading class as a contrast to his math class. He said the general education teacher was not physically in the classroom. She was a virtual teacher and would present the information through Google Meet. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the teachers that felt unsafe teaching in a classroom of students and had underlying health conditions documented by a physician were permitted to teach from another building without students. Chris explained that although another teacher was in the room monitoring, reading was still difficult. He said that many times there were network problems, and the teacher would not be connected virtually. He described how the assistant teacher, the special education teacher, was amiable and tried to help, but the general education teacher, the virtual teacher, was not helpful to the students. When asked about which teachers cared the most, Chris expressed that his math teacher demonstrated characteristics of caring for the students and made learning fun and engaging. He explained that he felt his reading teacher did not care about the students or him. When asked about whether Chris felt accepted or different, he said he felt accepted. He said he had a few close friends that he enjoyed engaging with, and he described the friends and positive influences. He said he had a couple of close friends that knew a great deal about him, referring to his likes and dislikes. Outside of school, he interacted through media such as Snap Chat. Overall, Chris stated that the majority of his classes and teachers were great, and they encouraged him to learn.

An observation was completed on Chris during his reading class, where the students were working on writing skills and vocabulary words. The class was at the maximum number of students allowed due to social distancing because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The general education teacher taught virtually. The special education teacher walked around the room to ensure students were on task. The general education teacher attempted to interact with the students, but she had difficulty hearing the students answer. The special education teacher tried to help the students with responding. During this time, Chris remained on task and was attentive to both teachers. He sat on the left side of the room and, from time to time, would turn around and talk to another student behind him. The general education teacher gave the independent assignment to read a passage, respond with a written response, and answer vocabulary questions. Once she gave the assignment, she turned her camera off and was not seen nor heard. The special education teacher remained in the classroom and had Chris and three other students join her in a small circle near the teacher's desk. She provided a read-aloud to the small group of students while the rest of the students worked independently on the assignment. While providing the read-aloud, she frequently stopped to remind the students working independently to be quiet and continue working. As the special education teacher read, Chris followed along. When she asked questions, he and the other students would respond. During the observation, the general education teacher did not engage or help the students, and she rejoined the class once the assignment was completed to remind the students to submit the work.

Colin

Colin was a twelve-year-old male in the seventh grade. Colin has a disability categorized under the label, other health impairment. When he entered the room, he appeared somewhat nervous. His demeanor was of a severe nature and quiet. He answered each question, and, on

some questions, he had to be prompted, or he was provided with clarification of the question. When asked to describe his reading and math class, and the teachers, he explained he sat in front of the classroom. He then added that in the majority of his classes, his seat was in the front of the classroom. He also said he was "...pretty good with reading," (Colin, Interview, March 5, 2021). Colin explained he was only passing in the English or reading class. He said he had a "D". He also described his other classes as being problematic. He explained that he receives assistance and consistent help in math because math is not his best subject. When asked how the teachers helped him, he said they help him one-on-one at the teachers' desks to provide direct instruction with the material. Although Colin did not feel confident about the material or classes, he stated that he felt all his teachers cared about him and wanted him to pass the classes. When asked about his perception of the treatment of him and his peers, he stated he felt they were treated equally. Colin was also asked about his interaction with his peers. He said he does not talk to many of his peers and only engaged and interacted with two people in the school. He felt these two students were his only friends. When he tried to talk to others, he described the students as not being nice and replying with rude comments to him. Colin stated that when he was treated negatively or demeaning, he tried to ignore the students, especially on the bus. However, when asked if he felt his peers accepted him or treated him differently, he said differently.

Colin was observed during his math class. During the observation, he was not in the general education classroom, but he was receiving instruction, accommodations, and directions for a math test in a small group setting. The special education teacher provided a read-aloud for the math questions upon student request in the small group. At the beginning of the test, Colin worked on the problems. He raised his hand and asked about certain words in the math problems. The special education teacher helped him with the formation of the problem, and then he solved

the problem. He worked on a few problems and then asked to go to the bathroom. He was gone for a time that was longer than the usual bathroom break. The special education teacher had to get him. Once he entered the room, he continued to work on his test. Due to it being a testing situation, the students were not allowed time to interact. The atmosphere was quiet as the students worked.

Dana

Dana was a student at the middle school in the seventh grade. She was twelve years old, and she had a specific learning disability in reading and math. Dana stated that she liked reading because of the interesting books they were allowed to read. She sat in the back of the classroom. She explained that it was her preference to sit in the back of the classroom. She explained that her teacher helped her in reading class. When asked about her teachers, she immediately shared that her reading teacher recognized that she had an Individualized Education Program and did not forget that she would need help in certain areas. Dana described the math teacher as being one of her favorite teachers. She said, “She helps a lot and she’s really funny,” (Dana, Interview, March 5, 2021). She also said the math teacher was caring and loving. Dana elaborated as to why her math teacher is her favorite by explaining, “...she’s just really nice and she’s basically like a grandma to everybody in there,” (Dana, Interview, March 5, 2021). She said that the math teacher helped her with reading the math problems and with solving the problems. She said math is the most accessible subject for her because she is able to stay on task and complete the work alongside her peers in the classroom. She commented that she does not feel behind. In reading, she said the teacher assigned many assignments on Google Classroom, and due to the amount of work, she felt overwhelmed and confused. Dana also explained in the reading class that the assistant teacher did not help her in a smaller group setting outside the classroom, which she

preferred. However, in math, the assistant teacher took the “IEP kids” (Dana, Interview, March 5, 2021) into a different classroom for a smaller group setting and helped the students. She said she preferred being in the small group because it was less distracting, and she received help. Dana was asked if she felt the teachers treated her like everyone else, and she stated that the teachers were strict but fair. When asked about peer interaction and acceptance, Dana replied that she talked to everyone in math. However, in reading, she felt that other students were mean to her.

Dana was observed during a reading class. However, the students were preparing to take the math Standards of Learning test that day, so the reading teacher gave them time to review their study guides. This class was at the beginning of the day. The students entered, ate their breakfast, and studied for the math SOL test. From time to time, the students would turn and talk to their peers. Once Dana entered, she began going through her notes and studying. She worked while other peers were talking. Dana sat at the back of the room. A girl sitting near the front of the room turned around and asked Dana about her weekend. Dana stopped working and engaged with the girl about events that occurred over the weekend. They talked for a few minutes and laughed about the events of the weekend. Dana then started studying again. One student, a boy, was out of his seat and disruptive. He was encouraging others to engage with him during this time. The teacher asked him to sit and study. Dana replied that he needed to sit down because he was distracting others. Although the boy was trying to get others to laugh and engage in conversation, Dana continued to study for her math SOL test.

David

David was a twelve-year-old student in the sixth grade. David was a student with Specific Learning Disability in reading and math. He came into the interview friendly and ready to

answer questions. He was extremely polite and would answer with “yes ma’am”. David was asked to describe his reading and math class along with the teachers. He referred to reading as being “alright” (David, Interview, March 5, 2021) and said he enjoyed it because there was a helper in the class. He commented that he was able to receive a great deal of help. The reading class was co-taught by a general education teacher and a special education teacher. He referred to the special education teacher as the helper in the class. He said he sat in the back of the classroom. In math, he mentioned that there was another helper, a special education teacher, which was a different special education teacher than the one he had in reading. He said that he completed his work mainly on the computer and only had a few assignments that required paper and pencil. He also stated his grades were good because he received the help, he needed from the special education teachers. David explained that he received accommodations such as a read-aloud, scaffolding, and demonstrations of the material, which helped him make good grades in math and reading.

David said he did leave the general education classroom to receive help in a small group setting. He explained that when he required help, he raised his hand, and the special education teacher or general education teacher came to his desk to provide help. He described the majority of the help he received as having the material read to him. David shared that he did well in math and mainly made an “A” in this area. Although he mentioned the special education teachers throughout the interview, he stated that he received help from both teachers and not just one specific teacher when he was in class. He said that during reading, the general education teacher helped him too. David was proud to share that the reading teacher sent a message to his mother bragging about David’s work and commenting that he had done very well. He explained that he felt his teacher cared for him because she took the time to communicate with his mother and

share his success. He described this as meaning a great deal to him that his teacher would message his mother to report that he did well. When asked how he was treated compared to his classmates, he responded that he felt he was treated fairly. When asked to describe his teachers and their attributes, he replied, "They're just real, real nice," (David, Interview, March 5, 2021). In addition, he explained that his teachers demonstrated their caring nature because they would take time from class to ask him about his day at school. Socially, he said he had many friends. He played football too. He was very excited that he was doing football and had friends playing football. During school, he said that he interacted with his friends by talking with them. He said he felt accepted by his friends and other peers. When he talked about his teachers, classes, and peers, he stated, "Everything works out for me," (David, Interview, March 5, 2021).

David was observed during his reading class. He sat in the back of the classroom. The students were given time to eat breakfast as the teacher completed the lunch count and attendance. During this time, David was quiet and proceeded to eat his breakfast. He did not interact with others around him. Instead, he opened his computer and looked at the work assigned on Google Classroom. Once instruction began, he stayed on pace but did not volunteer to answer questions. The special education teacher was presenting the lesson on vocabulary words. The lesson was a review of the vocabulary words introduced in a previous lesson. In addition, the vocabulary lesson was part of a bell ringer completed by the class as a spiral review of the material. David was asked to answer a question on vocabulary, and he had difficulty with the answer. The special education teacher provided prompting and helped him answer the question. A few minutes later, David raised his hand to answer a different question. He answered with confidence and smiled. After answering correctly, David began to participate and volunteer answers for other questions.

Dylan

Dylan was an eleven-year-old student in the sixth grade at the middle school who had a Specific Learning Disability in reading. He described his math and reading classes as having two teachers. He said there was a primary teacher and a helper teacher who was the special education teacher. He said that in math, the primary teacher used videos to help teach and then would use activities such as mysteries or puzzles to reinforce the material they had learned. He said reading was similar to math. Dylan described reading as a co-teaching situation, with both teachers taking part in the lesson and taking turns providing instruction. He said that the special education teacher usually began the lesson, "... 'cause she's a little bit younger," than the other teacher (Dylan, Interview, March 5, 2021). He stated he felt reading and math in middle school were "... a lot easier than elementary school," (Dylan, Interview, March 5, 2021). He explained that in math, they were given examples of the problems, and then they were allowed to do the rest of the problems independently, at their own pace. When asked about how his teachers treated him and which teacher, he felt cared the most, he replied that all of his teachers cared about him and that they "...had very nice voices to everyone" (Dylan, Interview, March 5, 2021). He said his teachers treated "...everybody with the same respect" (Dylan, Interview, March 5, 2021). In addition, he commented, "They would treat you like they would want to be treated," (Dylan, Interview, March 5, 2021). Also, he added that one of the teachers provided strategies to help him remember the skills and concepts being taught. Dylan explained that he was allowed to sit in areas of the classroom that helped him concentrate. When asked about his experience with interacting with friends, Dylan responded that he talks and engages with several students. He said they were given time to talk in the morning before class started and that he talked to several peers. He also explained that he did not feel different but instead accepted by the other students

in his class. Dylan said that he also played sports such as baseball. He stated he had several friends that also played sports.

Dylan was observed during reading. This class began at the beginning of the day, and he sat in the front of the classroom. When Dylan first entered the room, he was quiet and put his head down on his desk. The students had a few minutes before the class started to talk. Dylan remained quiet until a group of girls started talking about a boy. He turned around and started teasing them. The girls teased him back and included him in their conversation. Once class began, Dylan was quiet and listened. He then began answering questions. It became a competition between him and another girl to try and answer every question. Both students raced to raise their hands to be called upon to answer the question. When Dylan answered the questions the majority of the time, he was correct. He enjoyed the reading activity.

Frank

Frank was a thirteen-year-old male in the sixth grade. He is considered to be a student with a disability under the category of other health impairment. Frank was pleasant and was not shy, and he enjoyed talking and sharing his perception of his classes, teachers, and peers. Frank began with a description of his reading class. He said they did most of the work on the Chromebooks assigned to each student, and sometimes the teacher helped them as they worked on their Chromebooks. He stated he received the majority of help from the secondary teacher, the special education teacher, during instruction. In his math class, he said they used games to help them learn, and he described a game in which they were given the task of stacking cups within a time limit. Once time was called, the students were asked to count how many cups they could stack within the time limit. The students used the number for designated math activities.

Frank described the activity as chaotic, but he enjoyed it. He said he thought it was a fun way to learn. Frank stated that in reading and math class, he sat at the front of the room. When he compared reading and math, he said that reading was his least favorite class. He said it was because of the expectation of completing work on the Chromebooks. When asked which teacher he felt cared for him the most, he replied that overall, his band teacher cared for him the most. He explained that he would ride the bus with a friend to the high school when he was younger. During this time, the band teacher would take her time to talk with him, and she introduced him to some instruments in the band room. When he entered middle school, he enrolled in band class because of the teacher and her relationship with him. I asked him to think about the question again, focusing on his reading and math teacher. He replied that he felt his math teacher cared for him the most. However, he clarified that the special education teacher in the math class was referencing, not the general education teacher. The special education teacher helped him the most; therefore, he felt she was the teacher that cared about his success and well-being. When asked about academic accommodations, Frank mentioned that he frequently received a read-aloud and felt that using a read-aloud was helpful. Frank also mentioned that he has the accommodation of using a calculator, and he sometimes uses a calculator during math instruction. When Frank was asked how he thought the teachers in math and reading treated him, he said, "...pretty good but sometimes a bit different" (Frank, Interview, April 8, 2021).

When I asked him to elaborate on his feelings, he told me he could not really tell me how. He just felt that way. Frank was asked about how his peers treated him and if he felt accepted by his peers. Frank replied that he felt his "...peers treat him good," (Frank, Interview, April 8, 2021). Again, he stated that on occasion, he felt different than his classmates, but it was hard for him to elaborate as to why or what caused him to feel different. He stated that sometimes the

other peers talked to him, but then there were times that other peers did not engage with him. He stated that he talked to other students in his science class, which at one time only had three students because others were online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. He said one of his good friends was also his neighbor and that they had classes together. Frank also mentioned that he had friends at other schools. However, he only focused on the one friend at school and did not discuss any other students that interacted with him during classes.

Frank was observed during reading class, where the special education teacher presented the material in the first part of the class. The students were completing a spiral review of previously taught information. Frank sat at the front of the room and listened to the information but did not volunteer to answer. After the spiral review was completed, he was asked to complete a quiz with the special education teacher. The special education teacher and Frank entered a room where there were no other students. The special education teacher explained that he had not done well on a quiz and was given the opportunity to retake the quiz. Frank agreed to this opportunity. The special education teacher read each question and answer choice to him. Frank asked her to reread some of the questions. Once he finished, she graded it. She told him that he had passed. She commented that he rushed when he was in the larger class with his peers and therefore did not pass. She complimented him on taking his time and doing well on the quiz.

Results

After conducting the individual interviews, observations, and focus group interviews, the information was examined for broad themes. The data were organized and classified by using coding. Coding was used to identify similar thoughts and vocabulary used by the participants. The information was arranged by the different codes. Once coding was completed, the themes of the study were determined. This process was used with the focus group interviews as well. The

focus group interviews were examined for broad themes, and the data were organized using coding. The majority of the participants shared that they felt a sense of belonging due to the positive relationships developed with their teachers. The participants felt the teachers displayed a caring nature because they invested in the participants' well-being and desired them to succeed academically. The participants also shared feelings of equity and acceptance from their teachers.

Table 2

Themes

Major Theme	Subthemes	Codes
Relationships	Positive (Student-teacher Personal)	Family (4), Listens (7) Talks with him/her (5), Caring, Sweet (6), Respect (5), Nice (6)
	Positive (Student-Teacher Academic)	Understanding (4), Helpful (28), Funny, Silly (8)
	Negative (Student-Teacher Academic)	Not there (2), Busy work (1)
	Positive (Peers)	Same as Others, Friendly (9), Help Each Other (2), Stick Together/Pack (4)
	Negative (Peers)	Treat Differently or Feel Different (5), Loneliness (3), Ignored (3)

Equity	Teacher-student treatment	Normal (2), Same as the Others (12), Fair or Good (8), Equal or Equally (2)
Acceptance	Teacher-student actions	Understands Me (5), Everyone Gets Along (3), Accepted (8)

Major Theme One: Relationships

The first theme correlates to relationships in the inclusion classroom. When describing relationships in the classroom, the participants referred to their perception of their relationships with the teacher and also relationships with their peers. The practice of inclusion fosters the concept that students with disabilities feel involved and included in the classroom (Calder-Stegemann & Jaciw, 2018; Parkay et al., 2014; Parkay et al., 2014). In addition, the practice of inclusion incorporates the theories of Maslow with the hierarchy of needs and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development. When students feel a sense of belonging along with the feeling of acceptance, their self-esteem and self-actualization will increase (Maslow, 1943). Positive relationships also enhance and encourage learning and interaction among the teachers and with peers (Ferreira & Makinen, 2017; Mu, 2015). When discussing relationships in the inclusion classroom, participants referred to positive relationships between teachers and students and between the students and their peers. In addition, the participants also discussed negative relationships with their peers.

Positive Student-Teacher Personal Relationships. The first subtheme to emerge from the major theme of relationships addressed positive relationships between the students and the teachers. The majority of the participants described their relationships with their teachers as positive, and one reoccurring idea that supported this perception was that their teachers would take the time to listen and understand them, creating a sense of family. When asked to describe relationships with teachers, Alana, a student at the intermediate level, described one of her teachers as "...one that will always listen," and she included that one of her teachers was "...very supportive and (I) know she'll be there when I need her" (Alana, Interview, February 24, 2021). When referring to her relationship with her teacher, Alana commented, "We're basically like a family" (Alana, Interview, February 24, 2021). During the focus group interview, Alana explained that she could confide in her teachers and share with them different events that were happening in her life, and it helped her have someone to listen to (Alana, Interview, April 19, 2021). Another participant, Chloe, a sixth-grade student, described her teacher as "...someone (who) will actually listen to me because I have been ignored by teachers a lot, and I really appreciate it," (Chloe, Interview, March 5, 2021). When referring to the relationship with her math teacher, she also commented, "...she makes me feel like I could talk to someone," (Chloe, Interview, March 5, 2021). Brad, an eighth-grade student, explained that he enjoys sharing his ideas. He explained that although his ideas may have sounded absurd, his teacher listened with interest. In addition, he enjoyed events that had happened with his teacher, and he felt her interest in his activities was genuine. He explained that by demonstrating her interest in his life and listening to his ideas, he knew she cared (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021). During the focus group interview, the participants were asked to provide examples of how they

interacted with their teachers, and Chloe described her reading teacher as “Everybody is like her best friend...” (Chloe, Interview, May 13, 2021).

Other descriptions that addressed the positive relationships with teachers included reoccurring words such as caring, sweet, nice, and funny. The participants also described their teachers as showing respect to them. For example, Dylan, a sixth-grade student, described all of his teachers as caring, and he commented that they treat him with respect (Dylan, Interview, March 5, 2021). He also commented, “They would treat you like they would want to be treated,” (Dylan, Interview, March 5, 2021), demonstrating that the teachers respect the students and value their feelings. Another participant, Chris, an eighth-grade student, described the relationship with his math teacher as positive and used words such as nice, sweet, and funny to describe this teacher. He said, “Math is great. The teacher is very nice and sweet,” (Chris, Interview, March 5, 2021). Another participant, Alana described her relationship with her teachers as positive by saying her teachers are “...super sweet and everything, when I had stuff going on this year, I was able to take to them,” (Alana, Interview, April 19, 2021).

Other participants, such as Braylon, described his perception of his teachers as “goofy and fun”, saying that he enjoyed his teachers (Braylon, Interview, April 19, 2021).

Positive Student-Teacher Academic Relationships. Many participants described the relationship between the teacher and themselves in a personal manner. They described the teachers as willing to listen to their personal lives and caring about their well-being. In addition to describing positive relationships associated with their personal lives, the participants also described the positive relationships in correlation with learning. When describing one of his teachers, Chris, a participant in the eighth grade, used words such as “just awesome,” and when asked to describe why he commented that she was caring and would take the time to comment on

things they did in class with phrases such as “You did such a good job” (Chris, Interview, March 5, 2021). In addition, he said several of his teachers did not give busy work but work that related to situations they experienced (Chris, Interview, March 5, 2021). Braylon, a fifth-grade student who participated in the research, referred to the relationship with his teachers as positive because he explained, “They sort of believe in me, somewhat,” (Braylon, March 4, 2021). Aaron, a fifth-grade student, described his relationship with his teachers as positive and commented that his teachers “...work very hard,” (Aaron, Interview, February 23, 2021). David, a sixth-grade student that participated in the research, was asked what the teachers do that make him feel as if they care, and he commented that a particular teacher “.... helps me a lot, and she messaged my mom and said that he done real, real well and all that,” (David Interview, March 5, 2021). His perception of caring was when the teacher contacted his mother over his progress with his academics. Several of the participants related positive relationships to the teacher understanding their needs and the fact that they have an IEP. Dana, a seventh-grade student that participated in the research, described her relationship with her reading teacher as positive by explaining that “She helps me a lot and she don’t forget about my IEP or anything,” (Dana, Interview, March 5, 2021). Colin, another seventh-grade student that participated in the research, explained that he knew all his teachers cared about him because, “They all want me to pass,” (Colin, Interview, March 5, 2021). He went on to state that he knows they care because they “...make sure I don’t fail,” (Colin, Interview, March 5, 2021). Frank, a sixth-grade student, stated that he felt his teacher cared about him because she took the extra time to work with him in math class in a small group or one on one (Frank, Interview, April 8, 2021). Chloe, a participant in middle school, responded to the question about her experience with her teachers as positive because they are aware of her learning disability and recognize her needs. She said, “I want more teachers like

them, because I get the kids who have learning disabilities that it's hard for them to focus, and I just...I hope that the teachers can be more like them," (Chloe, Interview, March 5, 2021). Other participants described their experience with their teachers as a positive relationship because of how the teachers make learning fun, take the time to explain the information, and provide help such as reading the material to them or working with them independently. Chris explained his positive relationship with his teacher because she provides help and tries to be funny in class, making funny comments to keep the students engaged in the learning (Chris, Interview, March 5, 2021). Brian also stated that the teacher is funny during his class, and it helps with learning, and he attributes this characteristic to their positive relationship (Brian, Interview, April 19, 2021).

When asked what actions the teachers demonstrated that made the participants feel as if the teacher cared about them, the majority of the participants felt the teachers cared about them because they were invested in their academic success and offered help to ensure the students succeeded. Alana, a fifth-grade participant, attributed her positive relationship with her teachers because they wanted her to succeed academically. She stated, "I know they have a way to help me," (Alana, Interview, February 24, 2021). She attributed her good grades, mainly consisting of A's, to the additional help and strategies she received from her teachers. Alana explained that at a young age, she realized her brain processed information differently. She stated that learning changed for her once she qualified for an IEP. She was grateful and embraced the additional help and strategies provided to her. She described that once she was eligible to receive additional help and accommodations, this changed her perception of school and learning.

Alana said, "I got certain things I needed help with, and it's all really helpful, especially with my brain, it's taking in new information...I'm really lucky I get to have all this and everything" (Alana, Interview, February 24, 2021). During a focus group interview, the students

described their relationship with their teachers as positive because the teachers were willing to help with the material and present the material in smaller chunks or manageable portions to ensure understanding of the material and to master the skill (Amy, Interview, April 19, 2021). When asked about experiences with teachers during the focus group interview, Braylon commented that his teachers were "...helpful, they really try their best" (Braylon, April 19, 2021). In addition, during the focus group interview, Brad described his interaction with his teachers as a positive experience. He stated, "...if I need help, then the teacher is more than willing for me to come to her" (Brad, Interview, May 13, 2021). As the participants described their experiences with their teachers, they described their teachers as nice and then explained it was because they were available to help and made sure everybody received or "got" the help they needed (Chris, Interview, March 5, 2021).

Positive Relationships with Peers. Vygotsky explained that learning occurs in social settings and that social interactions enhance and encourage learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Inclusion provides students with disabilities opportunities to engage socially and academically with their same-aged peers that are non-disabled (Agoratus, 2020; Avcioglu, 2016; Bossaert et al., 2015; Dieker & Hines, 2014). During the individual interviews and focus group interviews, the participants were asked about interactions with their peers and how they perceived their friendships. While observing the students, notes were made relating to social interaction occurring in the classroom. The majority of the intermediate and middle school participants described their relationships with students with and without disabilities in a positive manner. For example, Alana described working with her peers in a small group setting as being part of a family. She said, "...we know we're gonna be very great working with each other for long as ever," (Alana, Interview, February 23, 2021). Choe described her interaction with her peers as

positive, and she felt a sense of belonging with the students in her reading and math class. She commented that when she walks into the classroom, her peers say hello to her and sometimes compliment her (Chloe, Interview, March 5, 2021). While observing Chloe before class, she was very social and would turn around and talk to her peers. She often laughed, joked, and interacted with her peers (April 8, 2021).

When discussing interaction among peers, Dylan commented that he had friends due to the fact that he participated in sports outside of school. He said he had played baseball and football for several years, and therefore he has friends because of sports (Dylan, Interview, March 5, 2021). While observing Dylan, I noticed that he was quiet when he first entered the classroom and began working. When the girls around him started talking about the new student and commented that he was cute, Dylan quickly turned around and started to engage that he had seen the new student in the hall. The girls and Dylan talked until class started, and as they talked, they would laugh and joke (April 8, 2021). David, another sixth-grade participant, discussed his friendships in school and commented that he was friends with Dylan, and they hung out quite a bit. He also participated in sports and stated that he had friends in football (David, Interview, March 5, 2021). While observing David, he was quiet, and once he entered the classroom, he began working on assignments. He did not interact much with many individuals around him. However, when they asked him a question, he would comment back and then return to his work (April 8, 2021).

Amy and Brian, both fifth-grade students, conveyed that they felt a sense of belonging in the classroom due to peer relationships. They both discussed interacting with peers that were in small group learning settings with them and with peers that were non-disabled. Both students described spending time in school and outside of school with their peers, whether having

sleepovers or doing other activities such as fishing or hunting. Amy described that before the pandemic of COVID, she would see her friends and "...go up and hug them," (Amy, Interview, February 22, 2021). Brian described his friendships inside the classroom and said that many of his friends had been his friends since early elementary school. He described his interaction outside of school with his friends as including "...text, sleepover, and hunt," (Brian, Interview, March 1, 2021). While observing both Amy and Brian, when given time to interact with other students, both enjoyed the time they were given to socialize. Amy shared drawings, laughed, and talked with peers surrounding her. Brian had a few friends sitting in different locations within the room, and he would attempt to get their attention, and they would talk or pass notes (April 20, 2021).

Chris commented that he had some friends and referred to a group of friends as his "main friends". He discussed having several friends within his classes and outside of his classes. One of his friends was a female whom he said knows "...basically everything I like and I'm like awesome," (Chris, Interview, March 5, 2021). He also discussed his role as a water boy to the high school football players. He described the players as "... very kind. They're very nice. They're very good friends," (Chris, Interview, March 5, 2021). Chris was in English when I observed him. For the few minutes before class, Chris was talking to the student in front of him. Once class began, he joined a few other students in a small group in a classroom section for a read-aloud. During this time, he interacted with a few of the students in the group. He appeared comfortable with his peers in this setting as well (April 8, 2021).

Negative Relationships with Peers. The majority of participants described positive interactions with peers with and without disabilities. In addition, several of the participants were observed engaging positively with their peers. However, some participants described feeling

different, and they found it challenging to establish and maintain friendships. For example, Braylon, a student in the fifth grade, talked about having a few friends, but mainly he focused on a student that bothered him because the girl "...thinks she's a smarty," (Braylon, March 4, 2021). He explained that the girl would say negative things to him during class. Outside of school, he said he did not have any friends, and he mainly interacted with family members. While observing Braylon during a math class, he was quiet and did not interact with the students around him. (April 20, 2021).

Although Aaron said many of the students treated him well, he also commented that he sometimes felt as if the students would not engage with him when he tried to talk to them. He said, "...they just ignore me, sometimes. It happens a lot. A lot," (Aaron, February 23, 2021). He described feeling different than the other students due to his interests, such as technology. As he answered questions about interacting with his peers, his eyes became teary because this was a difficult subject for him, and it hurt him to discuss these feelings. As I observed Aaron, he was interactive with his teachers. He initiated conversations with peers. They kindly responded. However, it was observed that the other students did not continue to engage with Aaron. Most of the time, Aaron would have to initiate engagement with his peers when they were given opportunities to talk (April 29, 2021).

Brad, an eighth-grader, said that others treat him "pretty good" however, he also commented that he did not socialize with others much. He commented, "I'm not really the best when it comes to socializing," (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021). I asked Brad to elaborate on this comment, and he replied:

Well since I have autism. Autism is...affects you in all kinds of different ways.

So, you can't just see one case and assume that a lot of people have autism suffer

the automatic same thing because they have autism. It depends like some people, it's kind... from what I know autism, it gives... it's kind of like a tradeoff for ... in exchange for being less social or being less capable of speaking very well, you actually become more skilled at something, like learning (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021).

Brad felt his lack of friendships was due to his disability and not because of the way others treated him. When he was asked how other students treated him, he said they treated him the same as other students, but he is the one that did not socialize (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021).

Colin, another middle school student participant that was in the seventh grade, did not feel as if he had many friends and mentioned only having two friends. When asked to elaborate, he said, "Those are the only people that like me," (Colin, March 5, 2021). He also commented that he was a quiet guy, and he said, "Everyone else I try to talk to, they're just not that nice," (Colin, March 5, 2021). He also referred to several occasions that he felt as if he was bullied by other students in other locations, such as on the bus. Colin was observed during math, where a group of students had been moved to a different location for a math test. He was quiet during the observation. On occasion, he asked for assistance or clarification on a math problem. However, for a significant amount of the class time, Colin was in the bathroom. The teacher had to find him and bring him back to class. (April 8, 2021).

Another middle school student, Frank, a sixth-grader, commented that although he felt his peers treated him differently, he could not give direct examples of why he felt this way. When asked, he would say, "I'm not really sure, actually," (Frank, Interview, April 8, 2021). He could not elaborate on why he felt they treated him differently. He said that he just felt that they did. Dana, a seventh-grade participant, said she did have friends in her math class but not in

reading. She felt others in the class talked about her and made fun of her. When discussing her English class, she commented, “I don’t really feel accepted by them, ‘cause every time I walk in there, they’re either talking about me, or saying things to me,” (Dana, Interview, March 5, 2021). I observed Dana during reading class. At the beginning of class, students were given a few minutes to socialize while attendance was taken. She was quiet and working on a study guide. Other girls in the class would turn around and ask her questions and try to talk to her. She would answer back and engage for a few minutes; however, she was more concentrated on the academic task assigned to the students. Several times other girls tried to talk to her, she would respond and at times laugh with them, then she would go back to work.

Major Theme Two: Equity

Teacher-Student Treatment. The practice of inclusion provides opportunities for students with disabilities to participate alongside their same-aged peers in the general education classroom, providing opportunities for learning and social engagement. Inclusion supports the idea of equity for students with disabilities (Overton et al., 2017; Strnadova et al., 2018). Students were asked how their teachers in their math and reading classes treated them during the interviews, and reoccurring words such as normal, same as the others, fair, good, or equally, continuously emerged. The majority of the participants were cognizant of their disability, and when asked how their math and reading teacher treated them, they would refer to the terms mentioned above. Alana replied to the question of treatment, “Like I’m normal,” (Alana, Interview, February 23, 2021). Brian commented that he was treated the same, and others were treated the same as him. He did not observe any differences between him and his non-disabled peers (Brian, Interview, March 1, 2021). In addition, Dylan commented that he felt the treatment he received from his teachers was equitable, and he further commented that the teachers treated

him with respect and in a manner, they would want to be treated. Therefore, his perception of treatment by teachers was fair (Dylan, Interview, March 5, 2021). Other participants also described their teacher treating them equally when compared to their peers in the class. Both Colin and Dana commented that they perceived how they were treated as fair and equal in comparison to others in the classroom. When Colin was asked about how his math and reading teachers treat his classmates and himself, he instantly replied with the word “equally” (Colin, Interview, March 5, 2021). Dana also replied that she thought her teachers “...teach me fair,” (Dana, Interview, March 5, 2021) in comparison to her classmates. She also added that she thought her teacher in reading should be a little stricter with some of the classmates that did not work as hard as the other students; however, she did not think she was treated differently than the others (Dana, Interview, March 5, 2021). Chloe also commented that her reading, and math teacher treated her like any other student in the classroom. She did not feel that she was treated differently than her classmates (Chloe, Interview, March 5, 2021). Overall, intermediate and middle school participants had similar perceptions about treatment from their math and reading teachers. The participants did not observe any different treatment from the teachers in the classroom due to their disability.

Major Theme Three: Acceptance

Teacher-Student Actions. According to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, individuals must reach a level of acceptance and love in order to be able to reach self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). The practice of inclusion supports students with disabilities learning in an environment with their peers, and inclusion incorporates acceptance among the teachers and students (Overton et al., 2017; Strnadova et al., 2018). When asked about how their teachers treated them, many participants used words and phrases such as accepted, understands me, and everyone gets along.

In addition, several participants referred to the classroom environment as being similar to a family. During the focus group interview, Alana and Amy commented that the teachers and students got along well (April 19, 2021). Alana made several references during the individual interview and the focus interview to her class being like a family. She described the students and teachers working together and representing a “pack” (Alana, Interview, February 24, 2021). She said the students would be there for one another, and they knew when a classmate needed something and would help (Alana, Interview, February 24, 2021). Many of the participants also described their teachers as understanding their needs, and the students felt the teachers were invested in their well-being and academic success (Chloe, Interview, March 5, 2021; Dana, Interview, March 5, 2021). Overall, the participants portrayed a sense of belonging in the classroom, and they felt accepted by peers and teachers.

Research Question Responses

The research questions for the study were designed to investigate the perception of inclusion from students with disabilities. The research questions presented in this study were designed to provide information not found in the current literature. Much literature has been presented on perceptions of inclusion from teachers, including general education and special education teachers and administrators. However, a limited amount of research is presented on the perception of inclusion from students with disabilities. The research questions presented in this study were designed to give insight and provide information from students with disabilities in grades fourth through eighth on their perception of inclusion, including the perception of social acceptance and academic success. The central research question investigated the shared lived experiences of students with disabilities in grades fourth through eighth in an inclusion classroom. Two sub-questions supported this central research question. The sub-questions were

designed to provide information focusing on two different aspects of an inclusion classroom. The first sub-question addresses feelings of acceptance in an inclusion classroom. The second sub-question addresses the lived experiences of students with disabilities regarding academic learning. These questions were designed to obtain information and provide rich descriptions of their perceptions of inclusion from the participants. Below are the questions and the findings from the participants concerning the questions.

Research Question Responses: Central Research Question

The central research question was: What are the shared lived experiences of students with disabilities in grade fourth through eighth in an inclusion classroom? The central question was designed to gain an understanding of inclusion from the perception of students with disabilities. This question was designed to provide a broad understanding of inclusion. Students with disabilities were asked to share their experiences of inclusion. Thirteen students participated in the research and provided a variety of answers. Although a variety of answers were provided, similarities occurred in many answers. The major themes that were identified included relationships, equity, and acceptance.

Overall, the participants viewed the practice of inclusion as a positive experience that promoted relationships with teachers and the feeling of acceptance, mainly with the teachers. The participants explained the relationships with the teachers as being positive on both a personal and academic level. The participants referred to their teachers as family members. One participant, Dana, referred to her math teacher as being like everyone's grandmother, describing her as really nice (Dana, Interview, March 5, 2021). Other participants, such as Alana, described her math and reading classes as students and teachers that interacted positively and were cohesive. She commented that her teachers and peers were supportive and like one big family

(Alana, Interview, February 24, 2021). Several participants described their teachers as individuals who would take the time to listen and care about the events going on in their life. Chloe described sharing events that had occurred in her life with her math teacher, and her teacher made Chloe feel valued and important because she listened and then would ask Chloe daily if she was doing well or if she needed to talk (Chloe, Interview, March 5, 2021). Alana described a similar situation with her teachers. She had experienced difficult situations in her personal life, and her teachers made the time beyond the academics to ask her if she needed to talk. She described her teachers as people who were there for her during a difficult time, and she trusted them to share her feelings (Alana, February 24, 2021). In addition, Brad described one of his teachers as a good listener, and she would listen to any of his ideas, even if they were different from ideas expressed by other students (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021).

Several participants described a correlation between their positive relationships with their teachers to academics. The participants knew their teachers cared about them through the use of academics. For example, Colin commented that his teachers cared because they wanted him to pass his classes and work with him (Colin, Interview, March 5, 2021). David explained that he knew his teacher cared because she would take the time to message his mother when he had done well in class, and this meant a great deal to David (David, Interview, March 5, 2021). Furthermore, other participants discussed that their teachers cared about them because the teachers believed in them and wanted them to do well in class, and the teachers worked hard with the lessons (Braylon, Interview, March 4, 2021).

Research Question Responses: SQ1

The first sub-question for the study was: What are the shared lived experiences of students with disabilities regarding feelings of acceptance in the inclusion classroom?

The purpose of the question was to explore what aspects and characteristics of an inclusion classroom helped students with disabilities feel accepted or explored students with disabilities' feelings of not feeling accepted. Overall, the students that participated in the study described feelings of acceptance, mainly with the teachers and several participants described feelings of acceptance with their peers. Characteristics that promoted these feelings were the display of respect shown to the participants, understanding of the various disabilities and the individual students, listening to the needs of the student, and displaying kindness and caring. Dylan was asked to identify his teachers' traits that demonstrated a sense of caring. He commented that he thought that "...all the teachers care about each student the same". He also explained that he thought his teachers were very nice and "...they have nice voices to everyone, they treat everybody with the same respect," (Dylan, Interview, March 5, 2021). Amy stated that she had a positive relationship with her teachers, and when asked to elaborate, she explained that her teachers demonstrate a caring nature because "They make sure I'm keeping up, and keeping focused," (Amy, Interview, February 23, 2021). While observing David, he was reluctant to answer questions during the bell ringer, which was a whole group activity. When David was directly asked a question about vocabulary, he struggled to answer, and then the teacher provided him with prompting, which helped him answer the question correctly. Once this was done for David, he became more confident and raised his hand to answer other questions. He answered another vocabulary question correctly and received praise from his teacher. He smiled as she praised him.

The participants also discussed the feeling of acceptance with peers. The majority of the participants experienced the feeling of acceptance from their friends. However, some students did not. For example, one student correlated the feeling of being different to his disability. He

stated that due to his autism, he struggled socially and felt different at times (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021). Another student felt ignored by his peers when he tried to engage. He explained that he did different things with technology, and therefore, it was hard for others to understand (Aaron, Interview, February 23, 2021). However, many participants experienced the feeling of acceptance among peers, mentioning events such as sleepovers, chatting on social media platforms, and participating in sports.

The participants also used words such as accepting, same, and equal to describe their experience with other classmates in an inclusion classroom. The participants described the inclusion classroom as having two teachers. The participants used different words for the special education teacher, such as assistant teachers or extra teachers. When discussing accommodations, such as being provided a read-aloud accommodation or dividing into small groups, the participants did not describe these accommodations as causing them to feel different or not part of the class. Brad commented that he participated in small groups “back in the day,” but now he only goes into a small group for the Standardized Learning Tests. When asked how he felt about going in a small group, he commented, “I prefer being in the smaller group,” (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021). Several of the participants viewed the extra help as beneficial. One participant viewed herself as lucky to receive the help (Alana, February 24, 2021).

Research Question Responses: SQ2

The second sub-question for the present study was: What are the shared lived experiences of students with disabilities regarding academic learning in an inclusion classroom. The purpose of this question was to gain insight from students with disabilities about their learning experiences in the general education classroom alongside their same-aged peers. The majority of the participants described their learning experience as successful. Several of the participants

mentioned that the teachers made learning fun and engaging. For example, one participant described a learning experience where the student had to stack cups within a given time and then count how many cups they could stack. Once the cups were counted, the students used the data to complete math problems (Frank, Interview, April 8, 2021). Another participant described himself as a visual learner. He explained that his teacher used visual representations to help him learn the material and that he did not think learning the material was too complicated (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021). Another participant, Alana, realized the benefits of inclusion and described her struggle with academics before being diagnosed with a learning disability. She explained, “Since I was young, I forget what was going on with my brain. Whatever was going on, I needed help,” (Alana, Interview, February 24, 2021). Once she was diagnosed with a learning disability, she was able to get help, and she commented that “Help is the number one answer...” and that once she started getting help, “It’s just changed, everything changed over the years from what I have compared to when I was younger compared to now,” (Alana, Interview, February 24, 2021). She was grateful for the help. She stated that now she made mainly As in all of her classes (Alana, February 24, 2021).

Furthermore, most of the participants view receiving accommodations and help within smaller settings as beneficial. Several participants mentioned they enjoyed working in a small group setting. They explained that they enjoyed being in a small group setting because it gave opportunities for them to interact on a personal level with their teachers. Several of the participants mentioned that when they are in a small group setting, not only do they receive help, but they also share stories and tell jokes with the teacher.

Other participants correlate the positive relationship they have with their teachers with their learning experience. One participant described her teacher as engaging and caring. In

addition, she said she was doing well in her class and making As and Bs (Chloe, Interview, March 5, 2021). Colin stated that his teachers cared and wanted him to pass, and because they work with him, he was passing his classes (Colin, Interview, March 5, 2021). Amy was asked about which teacher she felt cared about her the most, and she displayed a relationship between academics and teacher positivity. She explained that her teachers cared about her because they work with her and "...make sure I'm keeping up, and keeping focused" (Amy, Interview, February 23, 2021). She also shared that she was making As and Bs because her teachers cared about her and ensured she was doing her work (Amy, Interview, February 23, 2021). Another participant, Aaron, shared that his teachers gave him opportunities to correct his work for better grades, and he felt that this was an excellent way to learn the material because he was given more than one opportunity to learn the material (Aaron, Interview, February 23, 2021). The majority of participants shared that they felt successful in an inclusion classroom. Many participants shared that they were making good grades because they received the extra help, and they found this beneficial.

Summary

In Chapter Four, a detailed description of the participants was given. Furthermore, the themes were identified and discussed. The themes that emerged from the data included relationships, equity, and acceptance. The themes also had subthemes. The subtheme for relationships included positive student-teacher relationships on a personal level, positive student-teacher relationships on an academic level, positive interactions with peers, and negative interactions with peers. The subtheme for equity included teacher-student treatment. Lastly, the subtheme for acceptance consisted of teacher-student actions. The majority of the participants

perceived their teachers as caring about them. The participants described their teachers as investing in their well-being and listening as they shared events or concerns.

In addition, the participants described their teachers as caring because they were invested in their academic success. All of the participants described the treatment they received from the teachers as fair, equal, and treated the same as the other students. The participants did not describe any situations in which they felt segregated, isolated, or different because of how the teacher treated them in the classroom. Also, the majority of the participants felt accepted among their teachers. They described their teachers as understanding and recognizing they have a disability and therefore may need more help. The participants described the classroom environment by stating that the students and the teachers interact positively. Several participants stated that they feel accepted by their teachers. Thirteen participants were interviewed, and out of the thirteen participants, four explained that they perceived being treated differently by their peers. They described feelings of loneliness. These participants also described that they felt ignored by their peers. They also stated that they felt different from their peers.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the lived experiences of inclusion for students with a disability in fourth through eighth grades regarding the practice of inclusion at both a rural intermediate and middle school in Southwest Virginia. This chapter includes a summary of the findings. Answers are provided to the central question and both sub questions. This chapter also includes a discussion of the implications of the study, including the empirical, theoretical, and practical implications. Furthermore, in this chapter, delimitations and limitations are discussed. Lastly, recommendations for future research are also discussed in this chapter.

Summary of Findings

Participants for the study included students with disabilities in grades fifth through eighth. Although students in the fourth grade were invited to participate, no fourth-grade students returned the consent and assent form. The participants received instruction in math and reading in an inclusion classroom. The participants attended either an intermediate school or a middle school. Data were collected utilizing individual interviews, observations, and focus groups. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, guidelines for social distancing were followed during the collection of data. The individual interviews were conducted first with the participants. The questions were asked to gather information on the students' perceptions of inclusion regarding their feelings on academics and social interaction. Then observations were completed with each of the participants. During the observations, interactions between the participants and the teachers, and interactions between the participants and the other students in the classroom were observed. In addition, I observed the interaction of the participants with the academic tasks given during class.

Lastly, the focus group interviews were conducted. Questions were asked to gather information on the students' perceptions or feelings of acceptance with their teachers and peers in an inclusion classroom. In addition, the participants shared information on their perception of academics within the classroom. During the focus groups, the participants interacted and added information as each participant spoke. The focus group interviews were divided into two groups. The first focus group consisted of the participants from the intermediate school and the second focus group consisted of the participants in grades sixth through eighth.

After collecting the data, I examined the information in the interviews for keywords and codes. Several themes emerged from the collection of data. The themes included relationships with the teachers and peers, equity within the inclusion classroom, and acceptance from the teachers and with peers within the classroom. Furthermore, subthemes were determined from the data. The theme of relationships included the subthemes of positive student-teacher relationships and positive interaction with academics between the students and the teachers. Another subtheme included perceptions of positive relationships with peers and perceptions of negative relationships with peers. The theme of equity included the subtheme of teacher-student treatment. In addition, with the theme of acceptance, the subtheme of teacher-student actions was determined.

The research questions provided information from the participants regarding their perception of inclusion; therefore, giving information on the phenomenon of inclusion by providing their shared lived experiences within the classroom. For the study, a central research question and two sub question were used to gather the data. The central research question was: What are the shared lived experiences of students with disabilities in grades fourth through eighth in an inclusion classroom? This question was asked to gather information from the

participants on their personal experiences in the inclusion classroom. The participants shared information on their perception of social interaction and academic success. The majority of the participants described the classroom setting as including two teachers. They would refer to the one teacher as the primary teacher and the special education teacher as the assistant teacher or helper teacher. Other participants would refer to the special education teacher by name. One of the participants described his reading class as the teacher teaching virtually while the special education teacher would monitor the classroom. Due to COVID-19, teachers that had health conditions were allowed to teach remotely. When describing the atmosphere of inclusion, the participants did not indicate that there was a specific place for them to sit. Some of the participants sat in the front of the classroom, while others sat in the back of the classroom. The participants described the inclusion classroom as consisting of one teacher presenting the material while the other teacher would walk around to help the students. Colin, a seventh-grade participant, stated that when he needed help in the classroom, one of the teachers would be walking around to help the students and would stop at his desk to help him (Colin, Interview, March 5, 2021). Dylan, a sixth-grade participant, also described a similar setting in the inclusion classrooms. He stated that there were two teachers, with one teacher being the primary teacher and the other teacher was the helper. He described the setting as one teacher teaching and the other walking around to help others. He also stated that the teachers take turns providing instruction and walking around the classroom (Dylan, Interview, March 5, 2021). Chris, an eighth-grade participant, described the two teachers as the primary teacher and the assistant teacher in the classroom. He described the assistant teacher, who was the special education teacher, as the most helpful because she would walk around and offer help if they were having trouble (Chris, Interview, March 5, 2021). Other participants described the setting as receiving

instruction in the classroom and receiving help in a small group setting. Brad described participating in a small group setting only for tests. He explained that "...back in the day I used to go for a smaller group during most of the important tests, but recently, I can just do it with the rest of the class," (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021). He stated that he only participates in a small group now for the Standards of Learning test given at the end of the year. Brad also said, "I prefer being in the smaller group," (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021). Dana, a seventh-grade participant, described participating during instruction in a small group if she needed help with a quiz or missed an assignment. She said she enjoyed working in a small group because it helped her concentrate (Dana, Interview, March 5, 2021). Furthermore, Alana, a fifth-grade participant, described her experiences with inclusion as receiving instruction in the classroom with her peers and receiving help in a small group setting. She stated that "...I know those teachers that put me in those small groups understand what is going on and I know they have a way to help me" (Alana, Interview, February 24, 2021).

Observations were also conducted to provide information for the central research question. For the majority of the observations, the participants remained in the inclusion classroom learning alongside their non-disabled peers. Chloe, a sixth-grade participant, was observed during reading. She sat at the front of the class, and once she entered the classroom, she immediately began talking to her peers. Once class began, she would raise her hand and offer answers to the questions on the bellringer. She consistently volunteered answers during the whole group instruction (Chloe, Observation, April 8, 2021). Dylan, another sixth-grade participant, was also observed during reading. He remained with the whole group during instruction. At the beginning of instruction, he was quiet and observed his peers answering questions. However, he eventually began to raise his hand and participate by answering

questions (Dylan, Observation, April 8, 2021). Other participants were not as vocal during the whole group instruction. However, they appeared to stay on task and work alongside their peers. David, a sixth-grade participant, sat at the back of the classroom. He was quiet during the majority of the whole group instruction. He listened as the material was presented, and he worked. The special education teacher asked him if he was staying on track, and he responded that he was.

Although he did not volunteer answers, he was asked a question. He required prompting and then answered correctly. Once he answered the question correctly, he later raised his hand and answered a question about the word “geography” correctly. (David, Observation, April 8, 2021). Aaron, a fifth-grade participant, was observed during math. He sat at the front of the classroom. He worked ahead of his peers, and on several occasions, he was asked to answer the questions when the other peers could not.

Nevertheless, he remained on task and sometimes had to be asked to slow down and not work ahead (Aaron, Observation, April 29, 2021). Brian, another fifth-grade participant, sat in the center of the classroom and remained in the class during the entire lesson. Although he was quiet, he would work on the examples when the problems were given. When he had opportunities to talk with his peers, he would eagerly turn around and talk to the other students surrounding him.

Colin, a seventh-grade participant, was observed in a small group setting consisting of six students with disabilities to take a benchmark test. During the observation, Colin took a math test, and the special education teacher provided the accommodations of a read-aloud when requested by the student. Colin worked on the test and would write the problems on the paper to solve. From time to time, he would raise his hand to ask a question. In addition, he asked to go to

the bathroom during the test. Eventually, the teacher had to look for him because he was gone too long (Colin, Observation, April 8, 2021). Another participant, Frank, a sixth-grader, was observed in the general education classroom at the beginning of class and then in a one-on-one setting with the special education teacher for a vocabulary quiz. Frank received a read-aloud, and during the quiz, he interacted with the teacher and would ask questions or for certain words to be re-read. The teacher commented on how well Frank did on the quiz, and Frank appeared to be happy he had done well (Frank, Observation, April 8, 2021). Whether the participants were in a whole group setting in the general education classroom or in a small group setting, the majority of the students stayed on task and would participate. If they did not volunteer to raise their hand, they would answer the question if they were directly asked.

Sub questions were asked to gather specific information on the participants' perception of acceptance in the inclusion classroom and academic learning. Sub question one was: What are the shared lived experiences of students with disabilities regarding the feelings of acceptance in an inclusion classroom. Overall, the participants, whether in intermediate grades or middle school grades, perceived positive relationships with their teachers and expressed feeling accepted by their teachers. Some of the participants expressed feelings of acceptance by explaining how their teachers care about them beyond academics. Other participants connected feelings of acceptance and positive relationships to how their teachers work with them in the classroom. Braylon, a fifth-grade participant, described his teachers as believing in him and caring about him (Braylon, Interview, March 4, 2021). Alana described her reading and math teacher as supportive, willing to listen, and understanding her needs. She also explained that her teachers treat her like the other students like she is "normal" (Alana, Interview, February 24, 2021). David, a sixth-grade participant, stated that he felt "accepted" by his teachers, and he described

them as caring and nice to him, asking him questions such as how his day was going (David, Interview, March 5, 2021). A sixth-grade participant, Chloe, described her feelings as being accepted because she had shared some personal events of her life with her teachers, and from that point on, her teachers would take the time to ask her "...if I was okay, just make sure that nothing bad is happening at home," (Chloe, Interview, March 5, 2021). Brad, who was in the eighth grade, expressed his feelings of acceptance through the way his teachers cared about him and would take the time to listen to his ideas. They would also take the time to listen to what was going on in his life. Amy, a fifth-grade participant, described being accepted by the equity she felt in the classroom. She explained, "Actually, they (the teachers) treat me as others, but at the same time keeping me focused" (Amy, February 23, 2021).

Other participants expressed their feelings of acceptance by how the teacher would work with them and help them academically. Chloe, a sixth-grade participant, described her teachers as caring and accepting of her because she said she wanted more teachers like the teachers she has had. She explained that the teachers she has for math and reading understand students with learning disabilities and that it can be hard for them to focus. She stated that she hoped all teachers would be more like them (Chloe, Interview, March 5, 2021). A seventh-grade participant, Dana, described her positive relationship and feeling of acceptance with her reading teacher because the teacher would not "...forget about my IEP or anything," (Dana, Interview, March 5, 2021). Lastly, Colin felt accepted and cared for by his reading and math teacher because he said his teachers "...make sure I don't fail," (Colin, Interview, March 5, 2021). He also stated that he felt all of his teachers wanted him to do well academically, and he related that sentiment to them caring about him.

The majority of the participants expressed feelings of acceptance with the positive relationships that were formed with their teachers. However, one participant described his experience with his reading teacher, whom he described as the primary teacher, as being different from the rest of his teachers. He felt as if she only helped him a little, and he stated that she was not really there for them. He further explained that she was not physically in the classroom because she was teaching virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, he did not perceive this as a positive experience. He did not feel a connection to this teacher. He described this teacher as giving busy work and being difficult to talk with during class. He stated that part of the problem was that the teacher stated she could not hear the students due to the connection. However, he described the assistant teacher as being very nice to all of the students and willing to help the students when she taught in person (Chris, Interview, March 5, 2021). Other discrepancies of perceptions of acceptance were noted with peer relationships. Several participants described feeling accepted by their peers and interacting with them in the classroom and outside of the classroom with sports or other activities. However, four of the participants described the feelings of not being entirely accepted by their peers. The participants that described these feelings were in intermediate and middle school.

Aaron described the feeling as if he did not have any friends. Aaron stated, "I feel like I have no friends, and sometimes, I don't, and feel loneliness," (Aaron, Interview, February 23, 2021). When he was asked to elaborate or explain his feelings, he said, "Well, when I say 'hi' or 'Can we talk about this or that?', they sometimes just ignore me sometimes," (Aaron, Interview, February 23, 2021). He went on to say that he realized he has "...a little bit of differences," when comparing himself to his peers (Aaron, Interview, February 23, 2021). Braylon commented that he did not know if he was accepted or not by his peers. He explained that outside of school, he

does not interact with his peers. He said that besides his family, such as his cousins, he did not have any friends in the area where he lived (Braylon, Interview, March 4, 2021). When Colin was asked about feeling accepted by his peers, he said he only talked to two people. He said he only had two friends. Colin also said that others had said rude comments to him, especially on the bus. Lastly, Brad described only feeling accepted by a few people in his classroom. He explained that those few people do treat him well. He explained that he does not socialize with people. He said, "I'm not really the best when it comes to socializing," (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021). When asked to elaborate, Brad explained that he is autistic and that he could learn quickly, which is a "trade-off" for being less social (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021).

Sub question two was: What are the shared lived experiences of students with disabilities regarding academic learning in an inclusion classroom? This question was addressed to gather data on the perception of the students with disabilities about academic learning and the benefit of participating in an inclusion classroom with their non-disabled peers. The majority of the participants reported that they felt as if they were doing well academically in general education classes. Brad discussed the methods used by his teachers that helped him learn the best. He talked about the use of visual representations in reading and math. He also stated that he had an excellent memory, which helps retain important information (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021). Colin reported being better with reading than with math. He said that he is passing reading, and he attributed it to the help provided by his teachers in the classroom. He also said his teachers care about him and want him to pass (Colin, March 5, 2021). Chloe stated that she had done well academically in her reading and math classes. She said she had been getting A's in reading. She referred to the special education teacher as the "side teacher" or "assistant teacher" that would provide read alouds when she needed help and break down the question if it was confusing

(Chloe, Interview, March 5, 2021). David reported his grades as being “good”. He said he was obtaining “As” in math and that it was easy to keep up in math and do well. He said his teachers helped him as he needed it, and he would ask for help when he was having a hard time. He also explained that when he does well, his teachers will call his mother and tell her. David explained that he liked when the teachers did this (David, Interview, March 5, 2021). When Frank was asked about his perception of his academic success, he asked if he could talk about an activity, they did in math class. He went on to describe a hands-on activity that included stacking cups in a given amount of time. Once the cups were stacked, the students in the group had to report different types of data with the number of cups. He said, “It was really interesting,” and described it as a fun way to learn (Frank, Interview, April 8, 2021). Dylan also stated that he was doing well academically in his classes. He described different ways of learning in the inclusion classroom, such as using videos through Google Classroom. He stated that middle school learning is “...a lot easier than elementary school,” (Dylan, Interview, March 5, 2021). He also explained that the teacher would model and work through the problems in math and then let them work on the problems at their own pace. He also explained that the special education teacher helped him discover ways to help him learn and remember the information. He reported doing well in the classes (Dylan, Interview, March 5, 2021). Brian, a fifth-grade participant, also commented that he was doing well academically. He said that math was more manageable than reading and did not take too much time to do the work. He said in reading, it helps when the teachers read the material aloud to him. He did comment that when the students had to do school virtually due to certain circumstances with COVID-19, it was hard. Aaron also stated that he was doing well academically. He commented, “Sometimes I get almost an F and they warn me, and I do it again,” (Aaron, February 23, 2021). He said this method helped him with his work. He

said he worked independently, with little assistance; however, he does not hesitate to raise his hand and ask for help when he has difficulty. Amy stated that her grades are A's and B's. She explained that her math teacher was energetic and motivated her to learn. In reading, she said the teacher helped her understand the material. She also said the teachers make sure she stays focused and keeps on pace while working in the classroom (Amy, February 23, 2021). When asked about academics, Alana replied, "I feel pretty good about it, cause I get A's," (Alana, Interview, March 24, 2021). She also explained that compared to her younger years, academics had really changed for her, and once she started receiving help, she started doing better in reading. She stated that she received read alouds in reading, and she commented, "...that's actually really great for me," (Alana, Interview, February 24, 2021). Alana also explained:

Since I was young, I forgot what was going on with my brain. Whatever was going on, I needed help. Help is the number one answer. And something I know I'm gonna need a minute longer. I know the teachers are really there to help me and everything like that, so in math, If I don't understand, I know we get those small groups that help a lot. Especially when, what we're doing now in area, volume, perimeter. I got certain things I needed help with, and it's all really helpful with my brain, it's taking in new information. It's just really helpful, and I'm really lucky I get to have all this and everything." (Alana, Interview, February 24, 2021).

In conclusion, the participants shared a positive perception of social interaction with the teachers and academic gains in the inclusion classroom. Although the participants mentioned methods such as using small groups, they did not portray that they felt separated from their peers when they received this help. There was no significant difference in the perceptions of social

interaction and academic learning from the intermediate grades to the middle school grades. However, when discussing the feeling of acceptance from peers, in both the intermediate and middle school levels, some participants shared their experiences of feeling isolated, ignored, and lonely.

Discussion

This transcendental phenomenological study provided information that aligned or correlated with the empirical and theoretical literature reviewed in Chapter Two. Chapter Two provided literature reviews that discussed the purpose of inclusion along with the perception of teachers about teaching in an inclusion classroom. Furthermore, teaching practices were discussed in Chapter Two and the perceptions of students with disabilities that participated in an inclusion classroom. The theoretical literature incorporated the views of Maslow and Vygotsky. Maslow gives a hierarchy of needs in order for individuals to reach self-actualization. Included in this hierarchy are the different levels of needs that must be met. Safety, love, and belonging are two of the tiers presented in the hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). The practice of inclusion provides opportunities for students with disabilities to interact with their non-disabled peers and teachers; therefore, giving opportunities to achieve levels of safety, love, and belonging to help reach self-actualization (Overton et al., 2017). In addition, Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory is discussed in the theoretical literature. Vygotsky explained that individuals learn from the cultures that they are placed in and from observing and engaging with others within the culture (Vygotsky, 1978). An inclusion classroom consisting of students with and without disabilities provides opportunities for students to observe and model the actions of others and grow from the different cultures (Ferreira & Makinen, 2017; Midgen et al., 2019). Several of the themes correlated to the related literature.

Empirical Literature

The literature reviewed in Chapter Two focused on the description and purpose of inclusion, teachers' perceptions of inclusion, teaching practices within an inclusion classroom, and students' perceptions of inclusion. There is a significant amount of literature on perceptions of inclusion from teachers and administrators; however, there is a gap in the literature on perceptions of inclusion from students with disabilities. The participants' responses from the interviews provided several themes that correlated with the literature provided in Chapter Two. From the interviews, the themes of relationships, acceptance, and equity emerged from the information collected. The participants discussed how the positive relationships with the teachers and peers made them feel accepted and part of the classroom. The practice of inclusion supports the sense of belonging to a community (Overton et al., 2017; Strnadova et al., 2018). The practice of inclusion can create meaningful learning opportunities while providing support for students with disabilities (Overton et al., 2017). One participant, Alana, described her experience in an inclusion classroom as being "...just one big family" (Alana, Interview, February 24, 2021). She felt a closeness with her teachers and peers in the inclusion classroom and positively described the experience. She explained that the students and teachers cared for each other, and they acted as a "pack" (Alana, Focus Group Interview, April 19, 2021), they would be there to help each other as they needed it, and she said the students "stay together," (Alana, Focus Group Interview, April 19, 2021). Dana described the personality of her math teacher as sweet and nice. She said the teacher acted as every student's grandmother. She described how her math teacher was her favorite and because she interacted with the students, had a good sense of humor, and would make the students laugh (Dana, Interview, March 5, 2021).

The majority of the participants described feeling a sense of belonging due to the positive relationships they formed with their teachers, again supporting the purpose of inclusion. As stated in the literature review, teachers or educators that have a positive attitude and accept the practice of inclusion are more likely to create and promote a positive and accepting atmosphere academically and socially for students with and without disabilities (Ferreira & Makinen, 2017; Midgen et al., 2019; Wexler, 2016). When asked to describe how they perceived that the teachers cared about them, a few participants related caring to how the teacher helped them during class. For example, Amy correlated her teachers caring about her because she explained that her teachers "...make sure I'm keeping up, and keeping focused,". She also stated, "And I feel like they care because if they didn't care, they wouldn't add assignments or make sure you know what to do," (Amy, Interview, February 23, 2021). Benstead (2019) described inclusion as successful when a student experiences social inclusion, stating that academic learning and social inclusion are linked together. Colin and Dana, both middle school participants, perceived their teachers as caring for them because the teachers would provide help with the classwork to ensure the passing grades and because the teachers acknowledged the students had an IEP and, therefore, followed the accommodations to help the students succeed (Colin, Interview, March 5, 2021; Dana, Interview, March 5, 2021).

According to the literature, educators that create successful inclusive classrooms recognize and embrace the commitment to educating students with and without disabilities (Chong, 2018). Educators that invest in establishing and modeling positive relationships with students with disabilities and with nondisabled students promote positive experiences; therefore, promoting a sense of belonging within the classroom (Ferreira & Makinen, 2017; Midgen et al., 2019). Furthermore, educators who take the initiative, are proactive and accept inclusion create

meaningful academic and social experiences for students with and without disabilities (Ferrera & Makinen, 2017; Midgen et al., 2019; Wexler, 2016). The attitude of the teacher is the critical factor in the perception and success of inclusion. Educators are the significant factor in promoting a nurturing and positive atmosphere for learning for students with a disability and for students who do not have a disability (Avcioglu, 2016; Benstead, 2019; Kirby, 2017). Lastly, the literature states that positive interactions between students with disabilities and teachers are the building blocks to developing social relationships in the classroom (Benstead, 2019). The majority of the participants reported their teachers as caring and having positive attitudes; therefore, contributing to positive relationships and experiences within the inclusion classroom.

Dylan was asked to describe the teachers he felt cared about him the most, and he stated, “I think really, they’re nice, they have nice voices to everyone, and they treat everybody with the same respect” (Dylan, Interview, March 5, 2021), demonstrating that he not only felt his teachers cared and were nice, but that also he felt like an equal and treated the same as his classmates. He explained that the teachers helped everyone who needed help and provided different ways of learning to help the students remember the material (Dylan, Interview, March 5, 2021). Brian also stated that he felt that all of his teachers cared about him the same and treated him “good” (Brian, Interview, March 1, 2021). He explained that the teachers would help him academically when he needed it. Braylon stated that he had positive relationships with his teachers and stated that his teachers believed in him and would help him with his work and talk to him. Many of the participants discussed the connection with their teachers because the teachers took the time to get to know the students personally, beyond the academics. Brad described one of his teachers as being invested in his ideas, and he felt comfortable enough to share his ideas, he said although they might be crazy (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021). Chloe described her math teacher as going

beyond academics and asking her about her personal life. She explained that she had felt comfortable enough to share some personal events that had happened in her life, and her teacher would take the time to ask her daily how she was doing (Chloe, Interview, March 5, 2021).

Whether the participants were in intermediate school or middle school, the majority described forming a positive relationship with at least one of their teachers and described their reasoning by either relating it to a personal experience or an academic experience. In addition, most of the participants related their academic success to the positive experience and nurturing atmosphere their teachers had created in the classroom. Therefore, supporting the literature which states that teachers are instrumental in establishing an inclusive classroom that is caring and compassionate, supporting social and learning success for students with disabilities (Austin, 2016; Gumpert & McConnell, 2019; Kwon et al., 2017).

A significant amount of literature can be found on the perception of teachers regarding inclusion. Educators stated that preparation and support help to build self-efficacy (Stites et al., 2018). Providing teachers with more training with strategies for teaching, professional development, and providing support or help in the classroom builds self-confidence in teachers and, therefore, promotes positive experiences (Stites et al., 2018; Urton et al., 2014). In addition, training in using evidence-based practices for academics and social skills helps teachers with self-efficacy and promotes a positive environment for students with and without disabilities (Hughes et al., 2016; Johnsen, 2020). Furthermore, the literature supports that if a teacher embraces the practice of inclusion and models effective teaching strategies and techniques to all students in the classroom, not only will the students experience a sense of belonging, but other students will model this attitude and behavior (Austin, 2016; Kwon et al., 2017; McMurray & Ross, 2016). One participant described his reading teacher as not being as personable but giving

busy work. When describing his teacher, he stated that she was difficult to talk to during instruction. He stated that she only helps the students a little, and he perceives her giving too much work without explanation. However, as he continued to describe the classroom atmosphere, he shared that the general education teacher was not present in the classroom. She taught virtually from another location due to the COVID-19 pandemic. He referred to her as not helpful and stated that the special education teacher, whom he referred to as the assistant teacher, was the one that helped the most and provided the instruction due to poor connections or flaws with the technology. (Chris, Interview, March 5, 2021). The implementation of successful practices of inclusion is dependent upon the administration and teachers. Administrators and teachers are instrumental in establishing a positive, caring, and compassionate atmosphere for learning and social engagement (Austin, 2016; Gumpert & McConnell, 2019; Kwon et al., 2017).

In addition, several participants described their positive relationship with their teacher because of how the teacher provided instruction. Frank described learning as fun and engaging in his math class because his teacher would do hands-on and engaging activities. He was able to recall the lesson and how he and his classmates had to apply the data. He related this activity to a positive experience with his teacher because she made learning fun (Frank, Interview, April 8, 2021). Dylan described educational strategies used in the classroom, such as explicit instruction, used to help him learn. He explained that the math teacher would break the problems into smaller parts to help them solve for the answer. She would model the problems, then guide the students with the problems before allowing them to complete the work independently. He stated that this strategy helped him learn in the classroom and stay on track with his classmates (Dylan, Interview, March 5, 2021). The literature in Chapter Two described the use of evidence-based practices in an inclusion classroom as beneficial because EBPs promote learning success and

because these practices promote socialization among the students within the classroom (Foraker, 2020; Silveira-Zaldivar & Curtis, 2019; Williamson et al., 2019). Therefore, the participants' responses supported the effectiveness of the use of EBPs as promoting success with learning and with socially engaging with peers.

As stated in Chapter Two, a plethora of factors influence the academic and social acceptance of students with disabilities in an inclusion classroom. One factor that influenced social acceptance of students within the classroom is the type of disability. The literature in Chapter Two discussed that students with autism reported feeling unaccepted by their peers (Cullinan, 2017; Tomlinson, 2020). The students with autism stated that they experienced feelings of loneliness and isolation within the classroom. Although the majority of the participants perceived a positive relationship with their teacher, several of the participants described relationships with peers in a different manner. Out of the thirteen participants, four of the participants described difficulty with making friends. Two of the participants were students with autism. Aaron, a fifth-grade student with autism, described situations where he tried to engage with his peers by initiating conversation or talking to the students about subjects other than academics. He said that at the time, she felt ignored and that this caused him to feel lonely (Aaron, Interview, February 23, 2021). He realized that his likes and interests were extremely different from his peers, which caused him not to fit in. He shared that when he tried to talk to his peers, he tried to talk about technology, but many times, his peers were not interested, again he used the word “loneliness” (Aaron, Interview, February 23, 2021) to describe how it made him feel. Brad, an eighth-grade student that has the disability of autism, also explained that interacting socially with his peers was hard. He acknowledged that he has the diagnosis of autism, and due to this, he was “less social” (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021). He also stated that

due to autism, he was not "...capable of speaking very well" (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021). Therefore, he explained that he could not socialize well with his peers, and he felt that was the reason he did not have many friends (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021).

There is a gap in the literature on the perceptions of inclusion from students with disabilities. There is a limited amount of research describing the experiences of students with disabilities academically and socially within an inclusion classroom. Within the literature, some students with disabilities stated that they would rather stay in the classroom with their peers to receive instruction, even if that meant the work was more challenging or more rigorous (Whitburn, 2017). The students felt that leaving the classroom for help or small group instruction was stigmatizing and, therefore, hurt their reputation (Banks, 2017; Shogren et al., 2015). Other students with disabilities felt overwhelmed and frustrated with the presentation of material in the inclusion classroom. They felt the pace was too fast, and it was too difficult to stay on the same pace (Banks, 2017).

Furthermore, other students with disabilities described feeling like the general education teacher would purposefully direct negative attention to them if they were off task or could not answer questions asked during instruction (Banks, 2017). However, the data collected in this study clearly showed that the participants did not demonstrate feelings of segregation or that leaving the classroom for help or small group instruction was stigmatizing. In fact, some of the participants described working in a small group or receiving accommodations as beneficial. In addition, the majority of the participants described positive relationships with the special education teacher who provided the small group instruction. Alana described working in a small group as helpful She said:

So, I get paired up in small groups. It's the thing that helps me the most, 'cause I have trouble with reading and some things in math I can't figure out, so I know those teachers that put me in those small groups, understand what is going on, and I know they have a way to help me (Alana, Interview, February 24, 2021).

Brad, an eighth-grader, discussed that at one time, he would leave the classroom to receive help or instruction in a small group. However, he reported that he did not leave the classroom except when he has a Standards of Learning test. When asked about participating in a small group, he said, "I prefer being in the smaller group" (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021). Dana explained that she would occasionally leave the classroom for help or if she needed to make up a quiz. She stated that she liked working in a smaller group (Dana, Interview, March 5, 2021). During the focus group interview, Brian explained that he and other students sometimes would go into a smaller group for instruction and "...it just helps you really easy because we work with our teachers, and they help us figure things out, and certain things that we have trouble with" (Brian, Focus Group Interview, April 19, 2021). Once Brian answered, Amy stated, "I'm adding back on to that, I like how we go in small groups because she helps us and she listens to our stories when we tell goofy ones" (Amy, Focus Group Interview, April 19, 2021), demonstrating that she perceived her and the other students' relationships with the special education teacher in a positive manner. Alana commented that "Sometimes we are just all in the same group when we get pulled for math and reading. We're all together, so we're basically like a pack, we stay together" (Alana, Focus Group Interview, April 19, 2021).

Furthermore, Amy said, "I'd rather go on small group than peer work because if you need help with something and it's over, like the teacher's grade, then I could always go to someone in the small group (sic)" (Amy, Focus Group Interview, April 19, 2021). Amy meant that if the

period was over and she had not finished the work, she could finish in a smaller group, and she would rather do this instead of a peer helping her finish. Braylon stated that the special education teacher “Helped me a lot in small groups” (Braylon, Focus Group Interview, April 19, 2021). Several of the participants stated that they remained in the classroom for instruction. Whether the participants were in middle school or intermediate school, their comments on receiving help in a small group setting portrayed that they did not feel segregated or stigmatized, but instead, they viewed this as helpful and enjoyed engaging with the teacher.

Theoretical Literature

The theories used for the study included Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and Lev Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of cognitive development. Abraham Maslow described a hierarchy of needs, presented in different levels. The basic level is physiological needs. Maslow explained that each level had to be fulfilled before the individual could reach self-actualization, or their maximum potential. Among these different needs, individuals must experience safety, feelings of love, and acceptance (Maslow, 1943). The practice of inclusion provides opportunities for students with disabilities to academically and socially engage with their same-aged peers. Inclusion prevents students with disabilities from being segregated from their peers due to their disability (Avcioğlu, 2016; Bossaert et al., 2015; Dieker & Hines, 2014). The practice of inclusion promotes the feeling of acceptance, love, and safety by creating meaningful experiences for students with disabilities (Overton, et al., 2017).

Lev Vygotsky stated that children develop and advance by interacting with others in different settings referred to as cultures. His cognitive theory is known as the sociocultural theory of cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky explained that children construct knowledge while engaging with others. Vygotsky also explained that children’s actions occur in

response to other actions from their peers (Vygotsky, 1978). The practice of inclusion provides opportunities for students with disabilities to engage socially and academically with their non-disabled peers, and therefore when students are emerged in this culture, they will learn more from being included than excluded (Vygotsky, 1978).

The study provided data from the participants describing experiences that portrayed a sense of belonging, acceptance, and positive relationships with the teachers, correlating with Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The participants used words such as accepted and respected to describe their relationships with their teachers. For example, David described both teachers, meaning the general education teacher and the special education teacher, as being helpful and working with him. He stated that all the students were treated fairly in his class and that his math and reading teachers were very nice and would take the time to ask him how he was doing, showing him that they cared (David, Interview, March 5, 2021). Chris described his math teacher as nice, sweet, and reasonable with the work she gives, and he described her as funny and engaging with her humor. He described another teacher that taught a subject other than reading or math as "...a really good person" and described how she made time to make personal comments on their papers that encouraged them to continue to work (Chris, Interview, March 5, 2021). Chris demonstrated feelings of acceptance for his math teacher and keyboarding teacher, and he commented that he does very well in those classes (Chris, Interview, March 5, 2021).

Chloe and Dylan described interactions with their peers in and out of class that made them feel accepted. Dylan talked about how he plays football and other sports outside of school, allowing him to interact with his peers. He stated that he felt that he had several friends (Dylan, Interview, March 5, 2021). Chloe also stated that she felt she had several friends within the classroom, and other students would take the time to talk to her and compliment her. She

commented that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, she had not been allowed to have friends over to her house as she did before the pandemic (Chloe, Interview, March 5, 2021). While observing Chloe and Dylan, Chloe interacted with her peers once she entered the classroom. Dylan was quiet at first, but he would turn and talk with peers after a few moments, smiling and joking before class started. These different depictions of social engagement and acceptance among students with disabilities and peers that they either interacted with during school or in extracurricular events support Maslow's hierarchy of needs stating that individuals need to experience a sense of belonging and acceptance to achieve this level and move onto other levels that will help the individual achieve self-actualization (Maslow, 1943).

The participants in the study described situations of learning alongside their same-aged peers and engaging in activities to increase academic gains. During the interviews, the participants did not perceive participating in an inclusion classroom as being too rigorous or challenging. Instead, they discussed methods that helped them learn and engage with their peers. Although the COVID-19 pandemic placed limitations on group work and peer interaction during learning activities, some of the participants described activities in which they engaged with their peers and engaged in academic activities. For example, during Chloe's observation, Chloe interacted with her peers modeling and exhibiting behaviors over a new student that the girls thought was "cute." Her behaviors modeled the other girls with actions such as giggling and, from time to time, hiding her face so the other students would not see. Vygotsky described that when children are emerged in different cultures, they will respond to the actions of others (Vygotsky, 1978). Other participants, such as Frank, described learning opportunities that increased his academic knowledge. He asked if he could share and explain an activity that he and a group of math students completed during class. He recalled stacking cups within a set time.

The students tried to stack as many cups as possible. Once the time was up, the students had to count and apply math skills with the numbers. He described this as a fun way to learn and interact with others. He also commented that he would like more activities like this in math class (Frank, Interview, April 8, 2021). From engaging with his same-aged peers, Frank had the opportunity to learn from this experience with his non-disabled peers (Vygotsky, 1978).

Implications

Although there is a significant amount of literature describing the perception of inclusion by an educator or administrator, there is a gap in the literature describing the perception of students with disabilities regarding the practice of inclusion. Therefore, the most crucial stakeholder in the practice of inclusion has not been given a voice and opportunity to share their lived experiences with the practice of inclusion. Tomlinson (2020) described this as an essential component missing within the research. In addition, there is a limited amount of literature describing a student's perception of a disability regarding the student's feelings about having a disability. Kirby (2017) stated that students with disabilities felt different from their peers and felt stigmatized by the label of a disability. In addition, the students with disabilities were aware of the perceptions of their teachers regarding their disability. The following information addresses the study's theoretical, empirical, and practical implications regarding the perception of students with disabilities participating in an inclusion classroom.

Theoretical Implications

The majority of the participants reported feelings of acceptance and belonging in an inclusion classroom due to positive relationships with the teachers. The participants described their teachers as nice, caring, wanting them to succeed, and like family. Participants gave examples of how the teachers expressed their caring nature in the classroom. Alana stated that

the teachers have insight into her needs. She simply stated, “They understand what I need,” (Alana, Interview, February 24, 2021). She described different educational settings, such as participating with her peers in the general education classroom and receiving help and instruction in a small group setting. She did not express any feelings of segregation or feeling stigmatized by a disability. She described the realization of having a disability as a solution to a problem with reading; therefore, feeling very fortunate that she could receive the help she needed. Alana stated, “...I’m really lucky I get to have all of this and everything,” (Alana, Interview, February 24, 2021), explaining her perception of receiving help and support in an inclusion classroom. Alana felt accepted and had a sense of belonging in all of her classes. Chloe also expressed a sense of belonging in her math and reading inclusion class. She described her math teacher as willing to listen to her stories or problems; therefore, extending relationships beyond academics. She also explained that her teachers understood students with disabilities. She stated that “...I want more teachers like them because I get the kids who have learning disabilities that it’s hard for them to focus, and I just hope that the teachers can be more like them,” (Chloe, Interview, March 5, 2021).

I correlated the present study with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Maslow described the different levels of needs that an individual must meet in order to achieve self-actualization. Beyond the physiological needs, an individual must feel a sense of belonging and feel love (Maslow, 1943). The practice of inclusion provides opportunities for students with disabilities to feel included and accepted in the area of academics and socially; therefore, not segregating or excluding a student due to a disability (Avcioglu, 2016; Chapman, 2013; Dieker & Hines, 2014). The majority of the students described experiences in the classroom in which they perceived a sense of belonging and acceptance. The correlating factor from the data collected was the

teacher's attitude and how the teacher treated the student. The majority of the participants described their teachers as invested in their well-being. They stated that their teachers cared about them beyond the academic setting. In addition, this perception was the same and did not differ due to grade level such as intermediate level or middle school level; therefore, indicating the significance of teacher attitude and perception of inclusion. Several participants described receiving instruction in the general education classroom and in a small group setting. Although the students described situations in which they were separated from the whole group, they did not perceive this as segregating or stigmatizing. Once again, the participants described their teachers as providing an atmosphere of compassion, and in the small group settings, the teachers would provide more explicit instruction and take the time to joke and listen to their stories. During a focus group interview, Amy stated that she liked participating in a small group for instruction because the teacher "...helps us and she listens to our stories when we tell goofy ones," (Amy, Focus Group Interview, April 19, 2021). Once again, her positive experience was due to her perception of how her teacher treated her while working with her in a small group setting.

In addition to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, I also grounded the present study in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development. Vygotsky stated that children learn from being emerged in different cultures (Vygotsky, 1978). Providing students with disabilities with academic and social experiences in an inclusion classroom allows them to engage and learn from their non-disabled peers (Blackmore et al., 2016; Vygotsky, 1978).

The data collected from the interviews, focus group interviews, and observations supported this theory and provided information from the participants on their perceptions of participating in an inclusion classroom. While observing the participants, I observed many of the participants

interacting with their peers before the class began and during academic instruction. During the observation of Chloe, I noted her social interaction with her peers. Chloe was one of the last students to enter the classroom before instruction began. The observation occurred at the beginning of the day, and students were eating breakfast in the classroom due to implanted procedures because of COVID-19. Prior to Chloe entering, a group of girls discussed the new student, who was a sixth-grade boy. The girls giggled and discussed how they thought the new boy was cute. When Chloe entered, the girls quickly informed Chloe of the new student. She began asking questions about the new student, and she engaged in the giggling and chatter. Another participant, Dylan, who had been quiet and reserved up until this point, turned and started teasing with the group of girls. The group of girls responded by joking with Dylan about the new student. The participants were emerged in conversation, displaying the typical actions of young adolescents in this particular culture.

Another participant, Dana, was observed during her reading class. The class had not started; therefore, the students were given a few minutes to talk. Dana entered the room and immediately began reviewing for a test while her peers engaged in conversation. A female student turned around at her desk and asked Dana a question about her weekend, and Dana responded to the student and continued talking about activities outside of school. As other students entered, they engaged in the conversation as well. When Dana was not participating in the conversation, she would continue to study. However, while engaging in conversation, she laughed and smiled while talking with the other girls. Some of the other participants were quiet during instruction. However, they would raise their hand and volunteer answers. For example, during the vocabulary discussion during a reading lesson, David had to be prompted to answer a question. Once he was able to answer, he was encouraged to participate and began raising his

hand to answer questions about other vocabulary questions. The majority of participants emerged in the inclusion setting and displayed positive interactions academically and socially with their teachers and peers. A few of the participants did remain quiet. However, they would observe and watch others as they interacted and participated in the instruction. The implications of this theory indicated that participants that were emerged in this culture of learning and the participants were benefiting from social engagement and academic learning. Vygotsky explained that when individuals interact socially with adults or other peers that may be more advanced, this interaction can promote the individual's potential for learning. In addition, Vygotsky believed that without social instruction, a child's mind would not advance (Vygotsky, 1978). The participants engaged within the academic setting, observing and learning from their peers and adding their knowledge to the academic conversations.

Empirical Implications

As stated previously, there has been a significant amount of literature describing the perception of teachers and other staff regarding the practice of inclusion. In addition, a significant amount of literature can be found describing the purpose of inclusion and how an inclusion classroom should function. However, there is a limited amount of literature or a gap in the literature on the perception of students with disabilities regarding the practice of inclusion. Therefore, this study provided information from students with disabilities regarding their perceptions of inclusion. The participants shared their feelings of inclusion and described relationships with their peers and teachers. They also provided information about how they learn in the classroom and the effectiveness of the learning methods. Students with disabilities are the primary stakeholders, and therefore, this study gave the participants a voice about their lived experiences and perceptions of inclusion.

Although a small amount of literature stated that students with disabilities felt segregated and, at times, stigmatized due to their disability (Kirby, 2017), the majority of the participants described experiences of acceptance and inclusion during this study. They described positive relationships with their teachers. In addition, the participants described experiences of feeling as if they were treated the same as other students. They used words such as respected and accepted when asked to describe how their teachers treated them. However, a few of the students described experiences of feeling different or not accepted by peers. These reports occurred in both intermediate levels and middle school levels. Two of the participants were individuals with autism, and they both recognized that their disability could be a potential contributing factor. The participants provided information as to what factors made them feel accepted or for the few participants that did not experience this, and they gave information as to what made them feel excluded. This information was important because it gave insight from the lived experiences of the participants, the most essential stakeholders in an inclusion setting.

Practical Implications

The information gathered from the lived experiences of students with disabilities provides several practical implications regarding the practice of inclusion. The participants in the study provided descriptions of their perceptions of inclusion, giving information that can be used to improve the practice of inclusion. For example, the participants described the inclusion classroom as an atmosphere that provided acceptance, with the main factor being the teachers in the classroom and the way the teachers treated the students. In addition, several of the participants described the strategies used in the classroom, which were beneficial and helped them learn. Thus, the information from the study provides the perception and lived experiences

of the students with disabilities, which provides insight into factors that help make inclusion successful.

A limited amount of literature has provided insight into perceptions of how students with disabilities have viewed or interpreted having a disability. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the practice of inclusion and the academic and social benefits for students with disabilities. This study provided insight from students with disabilities on the practice of inclusion. Themes that emerged from the study included relationships, equity, and acceptance. When describing the inclusion classroom, the majority of the participants described having positive relationships with their teachers. The participants attributed positive relationships to either the teacher caring about their well-being and being invested in their experiences outside of school or to the teacher demonstrating the desire to have students succeed by investing in their learning experiences.

When asked to indicate which teachers cared about them the most and why they felt this way, the participants would note several of their teachers who cared about them, when asked why the participants shared their different perceptions as to the characteristics of their teachers, which made them feel as if the teacher cared about them. These characteristics ranged from engaging in conversation about their personal lives to feeling like part of a family. Several participants described having some difficult times due to family loss or other struggles within the family. Alana described her teachers as taking the time to ask if she was doing ok and she described one of the teachers as always willing to listen to her if she needed to talk. She said with confidence, “And I know she’ll be there when I need her” (Alana, Interview, February 24, 2021). She also described the students and teachers in her classroom as being like a family, and she explained that the students and teachers in her classroom would be there for each other (Alana,

Interview, February 24, 2021). Other participants described the teachers investing in their interests beyond school. Brad and Chloe both expressed that their teachers listen to their ideas and needs, and they respond with interest (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021; Chloe, Interview, March 5, 2021). Dana described her math and reading teacher as caring and described the different characteristics that made her feel this way. She explained that her math teacher used humor in the classroom and reminded her of a grandmother figure. Her reading teacher recognized her disability, and she knew the importance of her IEP (Dana, Interview, March 5, 2021). The different perceptions shared by the participants provide insight to teachers into what contributing characteristics help improve the practice of inclusion and foster feelings of acceptance among the students.

In addition to personal characteristics such as investing in the personal needs of the students and showing interest in the students' personal lives, the participants also described the presentation of instruction as being beneficial to help them feel included academically. The lived experiences which demonstrated this perception varied among the participants. Some of the participants shared that they felt as if the teacher cared because of her classroom strategies to provide instruction. As mentioned previously, Dana mentioned that the use of humor helped her learn and feel included (Dana, Interview, March 5, 2021). Other participants, such as Amy, also mentioned that the use of humor kept her engaged during instruction (Amy, Interview, February 23, 2021). Dylan described that the use of explicit instruction makes learning easy for him. He described that in math, the teacher provided examples and then guided practice on several problems before the students were allowed to work independently (Dylan, Interview, March 5, 2021). Frank described a hands-on learning experience that was not only fun but made him

engage in learning. He talked about how he enjoyed this activity and hoped they would do more similar activities (Frank, Interview, April 8, 2021).

Furthermore, other participants described that when the teacher takes the time to comment or connect through the academic activities, this made them feel accepted and included. For example, Chris commented that one of his teachers made personal comments on his work, showing that she was invested and cared about the work he was turning in. He described these comments as positive and encouraging (Chris, Interview, March 5, 2021). David described an experience in which his teacher called his mother to tell her that he was doing well in class and had done well on an assignment (David, Interview, March 5, 2021). As he described this experience, I observed his pride when his teacher made the phone call. The different perceptions of the participants provided information that can be used to help improve the practice of inclusion. One of the most imperative factors in the success of inclusion is the teacher's attitude from the data. The data collected from the interviews exhibited that if the participants perceived that the teacher cared about them, then they felt included, accepted, and overall, did well academically in the classroom alongside their non-disabled peers.

Delimitations and Limitations

When conducting the study, one of the delimitations made was the design of the study I decided to use. I purposely decided to use a transcendental phenomenological design for the study. This design was the most appropriate for the study because it is described as providing the appearance of things and themes arise from the information gathered from the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Furthermore, the transcendental phenomenology was the most appropriate for the study because it is used to describe and understand the experience of a selected group of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, this design provided

opportunities for individuals to share experiences in a particular setting to understand the personal experiences. Furthermore, this design provided information from the participants to better understand the phenomenon being studied.

Another delimiting factor was the selection of the participants. The participants were required to be students with a disability participating in an inclusion classroom in rural Southwest Virginia. The inclusion classrooms were either a reading class or a math class. In addition, the participants were students in grades fourth through eighth. The participants were either in an intermediate school setting or a middle school setting. Five of the participants were in the fifth grade, four of the participants were in the sixth grade, two of the participants were in the seventh grade, and two of the participants were in the eighth grade. Although letters of consent and assent were sent to parents of students with disabilities in the fourth grade, I did not have any participants in the fourth grade. Lastly, a delimiting factor was that the participants were minors under the age of eighteen. Due to the gap in the literature and lack of representation of students with disabilities regarding the practice of inclusion, the decision to use participants that were children with disabilities was essential to the study. Providing the shared, lived experiences of students with disabilities regarding inclusion provided insight and gave a voice to the essential stakeholders in the inclusion setting.

There were several limitations that affected the study. Although letters of consent and assent were sent to all parents of students with disabilities in grades fourth through eighth, only thirteen parents and students responded, giving consent and assent. Selecting these grades is a limitation because not all grades were represented. For example, if students with disabilities in the fourth grade had participated, this would have given more data from a different grade to the study. Also, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the research was conducted in two schools and not

expanded to other schools within the district. The limited number of schools is a limiting factor because if other schools had been included, this would have increased the data collected; therefore, expanding the views of inclusion from students with disabilities. Furthermore, the study was conducted in a rural area in Southwest Virginia. Using this geographical area was a limitation because this study only included the perceptions of inclusion from students with disabilities in a small school setting due to being a rural area.

Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of inclusion for students with disabilities in fourth through eighth grades in Southwest Virginia. Therefore, I sought to collect data on the perceptions of acceptance academically and socially from students with disabilities. The data collected from the study provides a direction to several areas in which further research could be conducted to gather more insight on the perception of inclusion. Therefore, the following information consists of recommendations for future research.

A delimitation factor of the study was that students that participated in the study had to be in grades fourth through eighth grade, and the students must have a disability. Future research to add information to the perceptions of inclusion could consist of using a transcendental phenomenological study including students that do not have a disability participating in an inclusion classroom. These students could share their perceptions of participating in an inclusion classroom and share their views of acceptance and interacting with their peers that have a disability. The shared, lived experiences would give opportunities to share their views of acceptance and if they accepted their peers or if they feel accepted by their peers. Information collected with this study would enhance the perception of inclusion by including students that do

not have a disability. Furthermore, this study would continue to include the voice of children, who are stakeholders in education.

Instead of conducting a qualitative study on the perception of inclusion from students with disabilities, this study could be conducted using a quantitative approach to collect data and report the results. For example, a quantitative study could be completed with the participants being students with disabilities to collect data on the perceptions of inclusion from students with disabilities. The participants could complete surveys or Likert scale to express or document what aspects of inclusion they agree with and other aspects with which they disagree. For example, participants could complete questions on the scale addressing feelings of acceptance and engagement with teachers and with peers. Also, the participants could rank on the scale their feelings about academic success in the inclusion classrooms. This type of study would present information in a different format; however, it would provide opportunities for children with disabilities to participate in the study.

Furthermore, only students with disabilities in grades fourth through eighth were invited to participate in this study. Therefore, this study only included the perceptions of intermediate-level students and middle school students. Further research could be conducted with students in grades ninth through twelfth grade to include the perceptions of inclusion from high school students. The design would continue to be a transcendental phenomenological study to include the shared, lived experiences of students with disabilities in high school regarding the practice of inclusion. These students may be more forthcoming with information to provide their perception of inclusion and information on academic success and social acceptance.

The research was limited to a rural area that consisted of smaller schools. A recommendation for future research would be to expand the study to schools that were larger or

in an urban area. The design would still be a transcendental phenomenological design so that information would be gathered to understand the experience of a group of individuals that have experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The views of perception may differ in an urban area compared to a rural area; therefore, providing more insight on the practice of inclusion.

Although the majority of the participants reported feeling accepted among their teachers and peers, some of the participants stated that they did not feel as if they had many friends. The few participants noted that, at times, they felt ignored by others. Two of the participants that described these feelings also discussed having autism. One of the participants stated that autism "...affects you in all kinds of different ways. So you can't just see one case and assume that a lot of people with autism suffer the automatic same thing just because they have autism," (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021). He also described that having autism was like a tradeoff, and he said, "In exchange for being less social or being less capable of speaking very well, you actually become more skilled at something, like socializing or learning," (Brad, Interview, March 5, 2021). When asked about his friends, he explained that he was less social due to his disability of autism. A future recommendation to add to this study would be to examine the perceptions of inclusion from students with autism. The design could be a transcendental phenomenological study to include several individuals with autism and gain insight into the different views from these participants on the practice of inclusion regarding social acceptance and academic success. In addition, further research could be conducted focusing on only the perception of acceptance in an inclusion classroom from students with autism. This study would provide insight into the lived experiences of students with autism in an inclusion setting.

Lastly, it can be challenging to determine the perception of social acceptance being due to a disability or due to the age and experiences of the participants. To gain insight and information on social acceptance among students, further research could be conducted with both students with a disability and non-disabled students in a particular setting. For example, the study may be conducted in a middle school setting, including those specific grades. Alternatively, the research may include grades fifth through ninth. The design would be a transcendental phenomenological study to include the lived experiences of a specific group of individuals. Information provided in this study may provide insight as to whether social acceptance is influenced by having a disability, by a student's personality, or by a particular age group.

Summary

This study sought to examine the perception of inclusion from students with disabilities. The participants were asked questions about social acceptance and academic success to gain insight into their perceptions of inclusion. In addition, this study gave a voice to the most essential stakeholders in an inclusion classroom. The information in this study provided insight from students with disabilities on their personal perception of acceptance, including a sense of belonging. Overall, the participants shared common perceptions on equity, feeling like they were a member of the classroom and treated like their other classmates.

Themes that emerged from the study included relationships with teachers and peers, equity, and acceptance. When the participants were asked about their experiences with academics and with their teachers, the majority of the participants described that they felt that their teachers cared for them, and they shared examples of how they perceived that their teachers cared for them. The participants also shared information about their perceptions of their relationships with their peers. Although the majority of the participants reported having friends

and said they felt accepted among their peers, a few of the participants reported that forming friendships had been difficult and they had felt ignored by peers in and outside of the classroom.

Overall, the positive relationship with the teachers was the contributing factor that related to success and social acceptance in the inclusion classroom. These positive relationships were formed with either the general education teacher, special education teacher, or both. The participants did not signify a difference in the teachers. They mainly commented on the characteristics of the teachers that contributed to the feelings of acceptance and sense of safety and belonging. Therefore, demonstrating the importance and influence of a positive disposition by the teachers in an inclusion classroom. The data collected from participants indicated that the presentation of the material and the teacher's attitude contributed to the feelings of acceptance and success in the classroom. In addition, strategies used when teaching the material were essential in making the participants feel academically successful. The participants shared that evidenced-based practices such as explicit teaching, providing feedback, and opportunities to participate in cooperative learning or group work, helped the participants feel included and able to continue at the same pace as their peers. Furthermore, these evidence-based practices kept the students engaged in learning.

The implications from the study are clear that when the teacher demonstrated a positive attitude toward the practice of inclusion and provided engaging learning activities, then students with disabilities felt accepted and experienced success with learning. Several participants mentioned leaving the inclusion classroom for small group instruction. During this time, the participants described opportunities to further practice the material or time to finish the material. The participants did not demonstrate feelings of segregation or being stigmatized by having a disability. Instead, the participants described having a positive relationship with the teacher that

provided the small group instruction. In addition, some of the participants mentioned that participating in a small group setting made them feel comfortable, and they supported each other in this setting. Once again, implicating the importance of a positive relationship with the teacher and with peers in the classroom setting.

Overall, it can be concluded that the role of the teacher is instrumental in the success of inclusion. There was a significant amount of literature detailing the attitude of the teacher influences the setting of inclusion. The data collected from the participants concurred with this information from the literature. As described by the participants, throughout the year, their teachers demonstrated caring and compassion; beyond academics to form relationships with the students. Due to the positive relationships formed with the teachers, the participants did not demonstrate feelings of segregation or isolation. Instead, the participants shared experiences of feeling included and cared for while participating in the inclusion classroom. In addition, the students did not feel separated from their peers when they received instruction or remediation in a small group setting. Instead, they viewed this as an opportunity to receive help with their work and bond with their teacher. Therefore, if students with disabilities form a strong, positive relationship with their teachers, they will experience feelings of acceptance from their teacher and academic gains in an inclusion classroom.

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Appendix A Administration Form

November 30, 2020

Dr. Chris Stacy

Superintendent

Dear Dr. Stacy:

As a graduate student in the Graduate Studies of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The title of my research project is A Phenomenological Study of the Shared Lived Experiences of Students with Disabilities in Inclusion Classrooms and the purpose of my research is to examine the shared experience of the perceptions of students with disabilities in an inclusion classroom.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research in Tazewell at Tazewell Intermediate School and Tazewell Middle School.

The data will be used to examine shared experiences between the participants and provide information on the practice of inclusion. The participants will be asked to participate in an individual interview and a focus group. In addition, I will need to observe the students in the inclusion classroom setting during math or reading. The parents of the participants will be

presented with informed consent information prior to the participation of their child. In addition, the participants will be presented with informed assent. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time. Furthermore, information will be kept confidential. Pseudonyms will be used for the students' names and the information will be secured either on my computer or in a locked file cabinet.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead indicating your approval.

Sincerely,

Michelle Brown

Doctoral Student at Liberty University

Appendix B Parent/ Guardian Form

Parental Consent

Title of the Project: A Phenomenological Study of the Shared Lived Experiences of Students with Disabilities in the Inclusion Classrooms

Principal Investigator: Michelle Brown, Graduate Student, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study
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Your child is invited to participate in a research study. Participants must be in grades fourth through eighth. The participants must be a student with a disability that receives academic instruction in an inclusion setting. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to allow your child to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why are we doing it?

The purpose of the study is to describe the lived experiences of inclusion for students with disabilities in fourth through eighth grade, in regard to the practice of inclusion at both a rural elementary and middle school in Southwest Virginia. This study will provide the thoughts and feelings of students with disabilities in regard to the practice of inclusion. The students will share their feelings on social acceptance and academic achievement.

What will participants be asked to do in this study?

If you agree to allow your child to be in this study, I would ask him/her to do the following things:

1. Individual Interview: The participant will be asked 11 questions in regard to inclusion. The interview will take approximately 20-40 minutes. It will be audio recorded using two devices. Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, the interview will be conducted in-person, following the social distancing guidelines, or virtually by participation in a Google Meet or Zoom Meet. The participants will be given the opportunity to examine their transcribed responses to check to ensure their responses are represented accurately, this is known as member checking. This process will take approximately 20-30 minutes.
2. Observation: The participant will be observed in the inclusion classroom setting. The observation will take approximately 30 minutes. I will be taking notes during the observation.
3. Focus Group Interview: The participant will be asked 6 questions during the focus group. During the focus group, the participant will be answering questions with other participants. The focus group interview will take approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour. The focus group interview will be video recorded. Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, the interview will be conducted in-person, following the social distancing guidelines, or virtually by participation in a Google Meet or Zoom Meet. Once again, the participants

will be given the opportunity to examine their transcribed responses to check to ensure their responses are represented accurately. This process will take approximately 20-30 minutes.

How could participants or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include information provided by the student that may be used to improve inclusion practices.

What risks might participants experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks your child would encounter in everyday life. As a mandatory reporter, if your child shares with me information beyond the scope of the study that would require a report to Social Services, I am required to make that report.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews/focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher and the transcription service will have access to these recordings. The field notes from the observation will be kept in a locked file cabinet. Only the researcher will have access to the locked cabinet. After three years, all field notes will be shredded.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

How will participants be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

What are the costs to be a part of the study?

For your child to participate in the research, there are not any costs.

What conflicts of interest exist in this study?

The researcher serves as a teacher at Tazewell Intermediate School. To limit potential or perceived conflicts, the researcher will not assign or record grades for potential participants or current participants throughout the course of this study. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to allow your child to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on her or his decision to allow his or her child to participate in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate will not affect your or his/her current or future relations with Liberty University or Tazewell County Public Schools. If you decide to allow your child to participate, he/she is free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should be done if a participant wishes to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw your child from the study/your child chooses to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw him/her, or should your child choose to withdraw, data collected from your child, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your child's contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw him/her or your child chooses to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Michelle Brown. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at _____ or _____
You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to allow your child to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to allow my child to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record my child as part of his/her participation in this study.

_____ Printed
Child's/Student's Name

_____ Date
Parent's Name/Signature

Appendix C Child Assent Form

Child Assent to Participate in a Research Study***What is the name of the study and who is doing the study?***

The name of the study is A Phenomenological Study of the Shared Lived Experiences of Students with Disabilities in the Inclusion Classrooms and the person doing the study is Michelle Brown.

Why is Michelle Brown doing this study?

Michelle Brown wants to know your feelings about the inclusion classrooms you participate in for school.

Why am I being asked to be in this study?

You are being asked to be in this study because you are in a grade fourth through eighth and you are a student who is identified as having a disability. Furthermore, you participate in an inclusion classroom.

If I decide to be in the study, what will happen and how long will it take?

If you decide to be in this study, you will participate in an individual interview, which will take about 20 to 40 minutes. Once the information from your interview has been transcribed, you will have the opportunity to check over the information to make sure it is correct, this is called member checking. The member checking will take approximately 20-30 minutes. You will be observed, the observation will last about 30 minutes. Also, you will participate in a focus group, which will last from about 30 minutes to 1 hour. After the information has been transcribed from the focus group, you will have the opportunity to member check again. You will check over the information to make sure it is correct and represents what you said. The member checking will take approximately 20-30 minutes. If you do not feel comfortable participating in-person with social distancing guidelines being followed due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, you can participate by Google Meet or Zoom meeting.

Do I have to be in this study?

No, you do not have to be in this study. If you want to be in this study, then tell the researcher. If you don't want to, it's OK to say no. The researcher will not be angry. You can say yes now and change your mind later. It's up to you.

What if I have a question?

You can ask questions any time. You can ask now or later. You can talk to the researcher. If you do not understand something, please ask the researcher to explain it to you again.

Signing your name below means that you want to be in the study.

Signature of Child

Date

Michelle Brown

Dr. Barbara White

Liberty University Institutional Review Board
1971 University Blvd, Green Hall 2845, Lynchburg,
VA 24515
irb@liberty.edu

Liberty University

IRB-FY20-21-223

Approved on 11-19-2020

Appendix D Interview Questions/Guide

Table 1*Individual Interview Questions*

Number	Question
1.	Describe your reading and math class including the teachers and how you learn in these classrooms.
2.	Describe your experience with academics in your math and reading classes.
3.	Which teacher or teachers do you feel care about you the most? What does she/he do that makes you feel this way?
4.	Describe your experience of interacting with the students in your math and reading classes.
5.	Describe how the accommodations you receive are provided to you during the instruction of math and reading.
6.	How do you think your math and reading teacher treats you?
7.	How do you think your math and reading teacher treats your classmates?
8.	How do you think the other students in the class treat you?
9.	What things do your peers do to make you feel accepted or different?
10.	In what ways do you interact with your peers outside of the school setting?
11.	Is there anything else you would like to tell me about how you feel about your math and reading class and how you fit in with your peers?

Appendix E Observation Protocol

Date:

Location:

Participant:

Activity:

Social Interaction Observed:

Academic Interaction Observed:

Activity:

Social Interaction Observed:

Academic Interaction Observed:

Notes:

Appendix F Focus Group Questions

Table 2

Focus Group Questions

Number	Question
1.	Please introduce yourself, giving your name and grade.
2.	What ways do you enjoy learning in the classroom?
3.	What are some examples of how you work with others in the classroom, including group or peer work? Please explain.
4.	How do you receive instruction in the class? Do you leave the class any for instruction?
5.	Describe ways in which you interact with your teacher in the class, what are your experiences with the teacher in class?
